

THE MOST THRILLING

NO 1 50c

SCIENCE FICTION

EVER TOLD

THE WORLD TIMER
ROBERT BLOCH

A DRINK OF DARKNESS
ROBERT F. YOUNG

A WORLD TO CHOOSE
POUL ANDERSON

DIPLOMAT-AT-ARMS
KEITH LAUMER

DONOR
JAMES E. GUNN



FIREMAN
J.F. BONE

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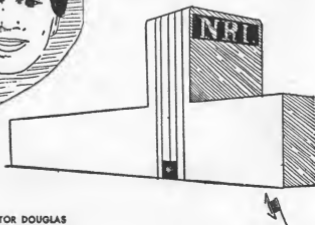
By JAMES E. GUNN

*No one could suspect
that a man who could
live forever would
risk eternity for a
child he had never seen.*

THE search had been organized to last a hundred years. Half of that period was already gone, and the search was no nearer success than when it had started. Only the ultimate desperation



ILLUSTRATOR DOUGLAS



can keep hope alive without periodic transfusions of results.

The National Research Institute was unique. It had no customers and no product. Its annual statement was printed all in red. And yet the tight-lipped donors made their contributions regularly and without complaint. Whenever one died, his estate was inherited by the Institute.

The purpose of the Institute was learning but not education. It had an omnivorous appetite for information of all kinds, particularly that on paper: vital statistics, newspaper clippings, hospital records, field reports. . . . A Potomac of paper flowed through the gray, bombproof monolith near Washington, D. C., and was reduced to meaningful punchings of holes or alignments of electrons from which computers would make esoteric comparisons or draw indecipherable conclusions.

Possibly only one man in the Institute knew its function. The thousands of other employees, many of whom were not listed on the payroll, performed their duties blindly, accepted their generous salaries, and asked no questions. If they wished to keep their jobs, that is.

The Institute survived on hope and thrived on death.

The main copy room was confusion which seemed to escape

growing into chaos only by accident. Mail was opened, entered, stapled, and passed along assembly lines. Newspapers were scanned by reading machines and then checked, line by line, by human readers. Copy boys raced along the aisles on roller skates. Clerks bluepenciled and clipped and commented to the automatic typers. Operators punched holes in blank cards or electrons out of blank atoms. . . .

Edwin Sibert threaded his way between the desks with a taut feeling of excitement as if he were on his way to a rendezvous with the world's most desirable woman. The copy room was old to him; he had spent six months there without learning anything. He didn't glance at it as he climbed the steps behind the office set over the copy room like a guardroom over a prison yard.

The outer office was lined with locked filing cabinets; their contents were meaningless. A colorless, elderly filing clerk puttered among the papers in one of them.

"Hello Sanders," Sibert said carelessly.

The desk by the door leading into the inner office was equipped with a switchboard, a scrambler, an automatic recorder, and a lovely, dark-haired secretary. Her eyes had widened as Sibert entered.

"Hello, Liz," he said, his voice as effective as his appearance.

"Locke in?" He moved past her to the door without waiting for an answer.

"You can't, Ed—" she began, springing to her feet, "Mr. Locke will—"

"Be very angry if he doesn't get my news immediately," Sibert finished. "I've found the key, Liz. Get it—Locke, key? A poor thing but mine own." He drew skillful fingers along the smooth curve of her throat and jaw.

She caught his hand, held it to her cheek for a moment. "Oh, Ed!" she said brokenly. "I'm—"

"Be good, Liz," he said gayly, his blue eyes smiling gently in his expressive blond face. "Maybe—a little later—who knows? Never can tell—"

But there would be no "later"—they both knew that. He had wasted a month on her before he was sure she knew nothing. He pulled his hand free and opened the door and stepped into the inner office.

Beyond Locke was an entire wall of two-way glass. From here, the general manager could watch the copy room direct or, if he wished, switch to indirect observation of the other rooms and offices of the windowless building. Locke was talking to someone on his private phone.

"Patience is our greatest asset," he said. "After all, Ponce de Leon. . . ."

Sibert turned his head quickly, but he caught only a glimpse of a face that great age had unsexed. It was wrinkled and gray and dead except for the eyes that still burned with life and desire.

"Interruption," Locke said smoothly. "Call you back." The screen set into the wall opposite him went dark as he touched the arm of his executive chair. "Sibert," he continued, "you're fired."

Locke was no youngster, himself, Sibert thought. He was pushing ninety, surely, although he looked fit and vigorous. Medical care had kept his body healthy; geriatrics and hormone injections had kept his shoulders broad, his muscles firm and unwithered. But they could not rejuvenate his old heart, his aging arteries.

"Right," Sibert said briskly, another man than the one who had spoken to the secretary in the outer office. "Then you won't be interested in my information. So long."

"Maybe I was hasty," Locke said. His lips framed the unfamiliar words awkwardly. "If your information is important, I might reconsider."

"And a bonus, too?" Sibert prompted.

"Maybe," Locke growled, his eyes small. "Now what's so earth-shattering that it can't come through channels?"

Sibert studied Locke's face. It had not spent all its days in an office. There were scars around the eyes and a long one down one cheek almost to the point of the jaw; the nose had been broken at least once. Locke was an old bear. He must be careful, Sibert thought, not to tease him too much.

"I think I've found one of Marshall Cartwright's children."

Locke's face writhed for a moment before he got it back under control. "Where? What name is he using? What's he—"

"Slow down," Sibert said calmly. He deposited his lean, young body in the upholstered chair beside the desk and leisurely lit a cigarette. "I've been working in the dark for five years. Before I give anything away, I want to know what I've got."

"You're well paid," Locke said coldly. "If this pans out, you'll never have to worry about money. But don't try to cut yourself into the game, Sibert. It's too big for you."

"That's what I keep thinking about," he mused. "A few hundred thousand bucks—what's that to an organization that spends at least one hundred million a year. Fifty years of that is five billion dollars. Just to find somebody's kids."

"We can get the information out of you."

"Not in time. And time is what

you don't have. I left a letter. If I don't get back soon, the letter gets delivered. And Cartwright's kid is warned that he is being hunted. . . ."

"Let me check that statement with scopolamine."

"No. Not because it isn't true. You might ask other questions. And it would take too long. That's why I couldn't wait for an appointment. Try to squeeze the information out if you want to." He lifted his right hand out of his jacket pocket; a tiny, ten-shot automatic was in it. "But it might take too long. And you might lose everything just when everything is within your grasp. You might die. Or I might die."

Locke sighed heavily and let his heavy shoulders relax. "What do you want to know?"

"What's so important about Cartwright's kids?"

"Barring accidents, they'll live forever."

The middle-aged man walked slowly through the station, his face preoccupied, his hands thrust deep in his jacket pockets. He rescued an overnight bag from a locker and took it to the nearest washroom, where he rented a booth. He never came out of the washroom. A reservation on the Talgo express to Toronto was never picked up.

A young man with a floppy hat and a Conquistador beard caught

a taxi outside the station and left it in the middle of a traffic jam in the business section, walked quickly between the immovable cars until he reached the adjacent street, where he caught a second taxi going in the opposite direction. At the airport, he picked up a no-show reservation on the first out-going flight.

At Detroit, he caught a jet to St. Louis. There he changed to a slow, turbo-prop transport to Wichita. He hired an old, two-seater propeller-driven plane, filed a flight plan, and proceeded to ignore it. Two hours later he sat down at Kansas City's Municipal Airport and caught a decrepit bus across the crumbling New Hannibal Bridge to the downtown shopping district:

It was decaying. Business had followed the middle class into the suburbs. Buildings and shops had not been repaired for a decade. Only a few people were on the street, but the young man with the beard did the best he could, ducking through arcades, waiting in doorways, and finally edging into a department-store elevator just as the doors closed.

The car creaked upward. When it reached the fifth floor, only the young man and the operator, a stooped, wrinkled gnome well into his eighties, were left. The young man walked swiftly through the floor to the Men's room.

Two minutes later he flushed an ugly, black mass of hair down the toilet, buried a hat under a heap of paper towels, and grinned at his reflection in the mirror. "Greetings, Mr. Sibert," he said gayly. "What was it Locke said to you?"

"*'You were an actor, weren't you, Sibert?'*"

"*'Once. Not a very good one, I'm afraid.'*"

"*'What made you quit?'*"

"*'It couldn't give me what I want.'*"

"*'What's that?'*"

"*'If your psychologists didn't find out, I won't tell them. That would make your job too easy.'*"

"*'Your mistake, Sibert. A live actor—even a poor one—is better than a dead adventurer. That's what you'll be if you try to set up something on your own. We've got you, Sibert—trapped in plastic, like that solidograph, and in measurements and film and ink. Wherever you try to hide, we'll dig you out. . . .'*"

"If you can find me, Locke," Sibert said to the mirror. "And you've lost me for the moment."

He raced down the fire stairs to the Main Street entrance, went through the dime stores, up the escalators, down the stairs, and out a side entrance onto Twelfth Street. As an east-bound bus pulled away from the stop, Sibert slid between the closing doors. A mile past City Hall, he got off,

ran through two alleys, and swung into a cruising taxi.

"Head west. I'll tell you when to stop," he panted.

The cabby gave him a quick, sharp glance in the rear-view mirror, swung the creaky '94 Olds around on its forward wheel, and started west. In that glance, Sibert compared the man's features with the picture in the rear seat's plastic pocket. For whatever assurance it brought, they matched.

When he dismissed the taxi, he waited until it rolled out of sight before he turned north. The street was deserted; the sky was clear. He walked the five blocks briskly, feeling a sick excitement grow as the apartment buildings of Quality Towers grew tall in front of him.

He couldn't see the "Y" where the Kansas River flowed into the Missouri. Smoke from the industrialized Bottoms veiled the valley.

In the early days of the city, the bluff of Quality Hill had been a neighborhood of fine homes, but it had made the cycle of birth and death twice. As the city had grown out, the homes here had degenerated into slums. They had been razed to provide space for Quality Towers, but fifty years of neglect and lowering rents and irresponsible tenants had done their work.

It was time to begin again,

but there would be no new beginning. A wave of smog drifted up over the bluff and sent Sibert into a fit of coughing.

Money was leaving the city. Those who could afford it were seeking a cleaner, healthier air and the better life in the suburbs, leaving the city to those who could not escape.

They could die together.

Sibert turned in the doorway and looked back the way he had come. There was no one behind him, no one visible for blocks. His eyes lifted to the hill rising beyond the trafficway. The only new construction in all the city was there.

Hospital Hill was becoming a great complex. In the midst of the general decay, it was shiny and new. It reached out and out to engulf the gray slums and convert them into fine, bright magnesium-and-glass walls, markets of health and life.

It would never stop until all the city was hospital. Life was all. Without it, everything was meaningless. The people would never stint medicine and the hospitals no matter what else was lost. And yet, in spite of the money contributed and the great advances of the science of health and life in the last century, it was becoming increasingly more expensive to stay as healthy as a man thought he ought to be.

Perhaps some day it would take more than a man could earn. That was why men wanted Cartwright's children. That—and the unquenchable thirst for life, the unbearable fear of death—was why men hunted those fabulous creatures.

Men are like children, Sibert thought, afraid of the long dark. All of us.

He shivered and pushed quickly through the doorway.

The elevator was out of order as usual. Sibert climbed the stairs quickly. He stopped at the fifth floor for breath, thankful that he had to go no higher. Stair-climbing was dangerous, heart-straining work, even for a young man.

But what made his heart turn in his chest was the sight of the woman standing in front of a nearby door and the long, white envelope she held in her hands.

A moment later Sibert leaned past her and gently detached the envelope from her fingers. "This wasn't to be delivered until 6, Mrs. Gentry," he chided softly, "and it's only 5."

"I got a whole building to take care of," she complained in an offended whine. "I got more to do than run up and down stairs all day delivering messages. I was up here, so I was delivering it, like you said."

"If it hadn't been important I wouldn't have asked."

"Well"—the thin, old face grudgingly yielded a smile—"I'm sorry. No harm done."

"None. Good night, Mrs. Gentry."

As the landlady's footsteps faded down the uncarpeted, odorous hallway, lighted only by a single bulb over the stair well, he turned to study the name printed on the door: Barbara McFarland.

He added a mental classification: IMMORTAL.

The quick, sharp footsteps came toward the door and stopped. Fingers fumbled with locks. Sibert considered retreat and discarded the notion. The door opened.

"Eddy!" The girl's voice was soft, surprised, and pleased. "I didn't know you were back."

She was not beautiful, Sibert thought analytically. Her features were ordinary, her coloring neutral. With her mouse-brown hair and her light brown eyes, the kindest description was attractive. And yet she looked healthy, glowing. Even radiant. That was the word.

Or was that only a subjective reflection of his new knowledge?

"Bobs," he said fondly, and took her in his arms. "Just got in. Couldn't wait to see if you were all right."

"Silly," she said tremulously,

seeming to enjoy the attention but showing a self-conscious necessity to minimize it. "What could happen to me?" She drew back a little, smiling up into his eyes.

His eyes dropped momentarily, then locked with hers. "I don't know, and I don't want to find out. Pack as much as you can get in one bag. We're leaving."

"I can't just pick up and walk out," she said quickly, her eyes puzzled. "What's the—?"

"If you love me, Bobs," he said in a low, tight voice, "you'll do as I ask and no questions. I'll be back in half an hour at the latest. I want you to be packed and ready. I'll explain everything then."

"All right, Eddy."

He rewarded her submission with a tender smile. "Get busy, then. Lock your door. Don't open it for anybody but me." He pushed her gently through the doorway and pulled the door shut between them and waited until he heard a bolt shot home.

His room was at the end of the hall. Inside, a tidal wave of weariness crashed over him. He let himself slump bonelessly into a chair, relaxing completely. Five minutes later he pulled himself upright and ripped open the letter he had retrieved from Mrs. Gentry. It began:

Dear Bobs:

If I am right—and you will not receive this letter unless I am—you are the object of the greatest manhunt ever undertaken in the history of the world. . . .

He glanced through it hastily, ripped it to shreds, and burned them in the ashtray. As he crushed the ashes into irretrievable flecks, he sank into a chair in front of the desk, twisting a sheet of paper into the typewriter. His fingers danced over the keys; they flashed down with electronic speed:

Near this nation's capitol, in a seven-story bombproof building, is the headquarters of an organization which spends \$100,000,000 a year and has not produced a single product of value. It has been spending for fifty years. It will continue for fifty more if it does not achieve its purpose before then.

It is hunting for something.

It is hunting for immortality.

If you have read this far, you are the third man besides the founders of this corporation to know the secret. Let it be a secret no more.

The organization is the National Research Institute. It is hunting for the children of Marshall Cartwright.

Why should Cartwright's children be worth a search that has already cost \$5,000,000,000?

Marshall Cartwright is immortal. It is believed that his children have inherited his immunity.

This fact alone would be unimportant were it not for the additional fact that the immunity factor is carried in the bloodstream. It is one of the gamma globulins which resist disease. Cartwright's body manufactures antibodies against death itself. His circulatory system is kept constantly rejuvenated; with abundant food, his remaining cells never die.

In the bloodstream—and blood can be transfused; gamma globulin can be injected. The result: new youth for the aged. Unfortunately, like all gamma globulins, these provide only a passive immunity which lasts only as long as the proteins remain in the bloodstream—30 to 40 days.

For a man to remain young forever, like Cartwright, he would need a transfusion from Cartwright every month. This might well be fatal to Cartwright. Certainly it would be unhealthful. And it would be necessary to imprison him to make certain that he was always available.

Fifty years ago, through an accidental transfusion, Cartwright learned of his immortality. He ran for his life. He changed his name. He hid. And it is believed that he obeyed the

Biblical injunction to be fruitful and replenish the earth.

This was his safety; to spread his seed so widely that it could not be destroyed. This was his hope: that the human race might eventually become immortal.

In no other way could he hope to survive for more than a few centuries. Because he could be killed by accident or by man's greed. If he were ever discovered, his fate was certain.

Cartwright has disappeared completely, although his path has been traced up to twenty years ago. In the Institute office there is a map on which glows the haphazard wanderings of a fugitive from mankind's terrible fear of death. Agents have worked and reworked that path for children that Cartwright may have fathered.

If one is found, he will be bled—judiciously—but his primary function will be to father more children so that there will eventually be enough gamma globulin to rejuvenate almost fifty men.

Once there were one hundred. They were the wealthiest men in the world. Now over half of them have died, their estates going—by mutual arrangement—to the Institute for the search.

Already these men are exercising a vast influence over the governments of the world. They are afraid of nothing—except death.

If they succeed, it will not matter if Man becomes immortal.

He will have nothing to live for.

Sibert read it over, making a few corrections, and grinned. He folded the sheets in half and then twice in the opposite direction. On a small envelope, he typed: I entrust this to you, your conscience and your honor, as a newspaperman. Do not open this envelope for thirty days. If I send for it before that time—verifying my request by repeating this message—I will expect you to return it unopened. I trust you.

He sealed the typewritten sheets inside the envelope. On a larger one, he typed: MANAGING EDITOR, KANSAS CITY STAR. . . ."

There was no use trusting public servants any more. It was not just that they could be bought, but that they were on the open market. Perhaps newspapers and their staffs could be bought, too, but they didn't usually go out looking for a purchaser.

He checked the tiny automatic to make sure that the chamber was full and the safety was off. He slipped it back into his jacket pocket. Cautiously he opened the door, inspected the dark hallway, and frowned. The single light over the stair well had gone out.

He slipped into the hall, the

stamped envelope in his hand held under his jacket to shield the whiteness. At the top of the stairs he hesitated and then turned to the mail chute. He fished a coin out of his pocket and dropped it into the slot. For a few seconds, it clinked against the side of the chute as it fell.

The chute was clear. With a gesture of finality, Sibert shoved the letter through the slot.

"Insurance, Eddy?"

Sibert whirled, his hand thrust deep into his jacket pocket. Slowly he relaxed against the wall as a shadow detached itself from the shadows beside the stairs and moved toward him, resolving into a lean, dark-faced man with thin lips curling in a gently deprecatory smile.

"That's what it is, Les," Sibert said easily. "What are you doing up here?"

"Now, Eddy," Les protested mildly, "let's not play games. You know what I want. The kid, Eddy."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Les."

"Don't be cute, Eddy. Locke sent me. It's all over."

"How did you find me?"

"I never lost you. I'm your shadow, Eddy. Did you ever learn that poem when you were a kid:

I've got a little shadow

That goes in and out with me,

And what can be the use of him

Is more than I can see?

Locke may be old, Eddy, but he ain't dumb. He's pretty cute, in fact. He knows all the tricks. You shouldn't oughta cross him, Eddy. Everybody's got a shadow. I got a shadow, too, I guess. I wonder who he is. I didn't have to follow you, Eddy. Locke let me know you were coming home. Now, Eddy, the kid. Where is he?"

So that was why Les had that front apartment on the first floor, Sibert thought ruefully. And that was why he sat there hour after hour in the dark with his door ajar. "You know better than that, Les. I can't tell you. I know too much."

"That's what Locke said," Les told him softly. "The kid's in the building, Eddy, we know that. Maybe right on this floor. You wouldn't let him get far away. And you'd hurry back to him, first thing. I'd like to make it easy on you, boy. But if you want us to do it the hard way—"

His lifting hand held a vest-pocket gun.

Sibert squeezed the automatic in his pocket. It exploded twice, thunderous in the uncarpeted hallway. Surprise blanked Les's bony face; pain twisted it as he leaned toward Sibert, his shoulders hunching, his gun hand coming down over his abdomen to hold in the pain. In grotesque slow motion, he folded forward



onto the floor. He was dead.

Sibert was bringing his gun out, patting the tattered hole in his pocket to smother the flames, as a third shot shook the hall. Flame spurted down the stairs. The bullet flung Sibert back against the mail chute. His left hand clutched his chest as he triggered three quick shots toward the flash.

In the silence that followed, someone sighed. Like a sack of old bones, a body tumbled down the stairs from the landing above. It stopped at the bottom and leaned its head tiredly against the wall.

The wrinkled old face framed in gray hair was very dead. Through the pain, Sibert smiled at it. "What a delightful hostelry you keep, Mrs. Gentry," he said softly.

He started to chuckle but it turned into a fit of coughing. A pink froth stained his lips.

Someone was slapping him in the face. Someone kept saying, "Eddy! Eddy!" Over and over. His head weaved as he tried to get away, tried to force his eyes open.

Behind him was the mail chute. He was still leaning against it, but he felt disembodied, as if he were somewhere else receiving these odd sensations distantly, attenuated and distorted. He had blacked out for a moment, he

thought feverishly. Give him a few minutes; he'd be all right.

"Eddy!" The voice was getting hysterical. "What's happened? You're bleeding!"

"Hello, Bobs," Sibert said weakly. "Funny thing—" He began to laugh, but it brought back the coughing. When the spell was over, his hand was freckled with blood. It sobered him. "You're—dangerous companion, Bobs," he panted. "Come on—got to get out of here."

He caught her arm and tried to start for the stairs. She held him back. "You're hurt. You need a doctor. We can't go anywhere until you've had medical attention. And these bodies—one of them is Mrs. Gentry—"

"Lovely woman, Mrs. Gentry," Sibert said wryly. "Especially dead. Shot me, she did. Come on, Bobs—no time. Explanations later. They're—after you!"

She let him pull her to the head of the stairs. There he sagged. She took his right hand and pulled it across her shoulders; she put her left arm around his waist. She was surprisingly strong. Together, his left hand clinging desperately to the hand rail, they descended the never-ending stairs, down and around and down, until, at last, the stairs ended and his knees buckled.

The broad first-floor hall was blurred like an old photograph. Sibert frowned, trying to bring

it into focus, thinking: *this is what it is like to grow old, to have the senses fail, the muscles weaken, the living organs and functions of the body die within him. And finally death.*

Someone was talking. Barbara again, trying to make him say something. "Where do we go now?" she kept saying.

He tried to think, but thought was torture. "Hide. Any place. Trust nobody. Everyone—against us."

And then there was no memory at all, only the irony that stayed with him, that edged his dreams about a young man who went hunting for life but found the dark companion instead.

He woke to a pearl-gray mustiness and thought it was dream. He was alone. His chest burned. He pressed it with his hand. When he brought it away, the hand was dark. He tried to make out the color in the dimness, but it was too difficult. It dripped unconsciousness into his eyes.

The second time was reality. This time he was sure. He was in a basement. He raised himself on one elbow, finding the strength in some hidden reservoir. Barbara knelt beside him. He was lying on a cot. Down a little farther, sitting on the cot, was a white-coated stranger. He had a hypodermic in his hand.

"Get away from me!" Sibert

shouted hoarsely. "It's no use—"

Gently, Barbara pushed him back. "It's a doctor, Eddy. I got a doctor."

He lay back, feeling stronger, watching. Maybe the man was a doctor. Maybe he was something else, too. Everyone was suspect.

He sneaked his hand down his side, but the pocket was empty. The gun was gone.

The hypodermic was slipped back into its case, and the case was deposited in its slot in the black bag. That meant the injection had already been given, Sibert thought.

"I've done all I can," the doctor said sullenly. "I've patched the holes in his shoulder, but there's no way to patch the holes in his lung. Only time can do that and the proper care. I think it's too late now. The man's dying. It's a wonder to me he isn't in shock already."

"Would a transfusion help?" Barbara asked quietly.

"At this stage, I doubt it. No point in pouring water into a sieve. Besides, I've no blood with me. If you would let me get him to a hospital—"

"Use my blood."

"Impossible! There's no equipment here for typing and cross-matching, not to mention the unsanitary conditions—"

"I said, 'Use my blood.'" Barbara's voice was hard.

Sibert looked at her. She had a

gun in her hand. His gun. It pointed unwaveringly at the doctor, Barbara's knuckles white where they gripped the handle.

The doctor frowned uncertainly. "What's your blood type?" he asked Sibert.

"O-negative," Sibert said. His voice seemed a long way off.

"Yours?" the doctor said, turning toward Barbara.

"What does it matter? If you don't use it, he dies anyway."

That was callous, Sibert thought vaguely. He had not suspected that Barbara could be so hard.

Silently the doctor removed a small, square box from his bag. *A fractionating machine,* Sibert thought. He brought out plastic tubing equipped with needles and fastened them to the box. . . .

"Whole blood," Barbara said, "not just the plasma!"

Things were getting distant. Sibert felt weak again and old and used up. He fought to stay conscious.

Barbara sank down beside the cot, the gun steady in her right hand. The basement was dark and dirty, littered with trash, from decades of neglect.

Dimly Sibert felt the doctor swab his arm and the distant pressure of the needle. But as the blood began to flow, he felt stronger. It was like liquid life.

"That's a pint," the doctor said.

"All right. Shut it off."

"I'll have to report this, you know. That's a gun-shot wound."

"It doesn't matter. We'll be gone by then."

"Try to move this man again, and he'll die of shock."

The voices were fading. He was going to sleep again, Sibert realized with dismay. He struggled against the rich, black tide, but it was hopeless.

Just before he went under, he saw the doctor turn his head to replace the equipment. A hand swept in front of Sibert's eyes. There was something metallic in it. It made a funny, hollow sound when it hit the doctor's head.

"Wake up, Eddy! You've got to wake up!"

The coolness came against his face again, soothing his fever. He stirred. A groan escaped him.

"You've got to get up, Eddy. We have to find another place to hide."

He worked his eyes open. Barbara's face was above him, her eyes wide and concerned, her face haggard.

She wiped his face again with a damp cloth. "Try, Eddy!" she urged. "We can't stay here much longer."

I'll die, he thought. *That's what the doctor said.* Then he remembered Locke and what he was fighting for.

He tried to get up. After a few seconds of futile struggle, he slumped back, moaning. The second time, Barbara helped him. She slipped an arm under him. She lifted. He sat up, and the dark basement reeled, spun crazily around him.

A little later he was standing, although he couldn't remember how he got to his feet. His legs were miles away. He told them to move, but they were stubborn. He had to lift them one by one and put them down. Only Barbara beside him kept him upright.

Against the dark, old octopus that was an ancient, coal-fired, gravity furnace, the doctor was propped, his chin against his chest. "Dead?" Sibert asked. His voice sounded thin.

"Don't talk. He's drugged, that's all. They'll be looking for him soon. He was just leaving the hospital when I made him come with me. Nobody saw us, but they'll begin to suspect something when he doesn't show up for duty. I let you rest as long as I could, but now we've got to leave."

Somehow they reached the rickety steps that led upwards toward brightness. Beside him, holding him up, Barbara sobbed suddenly. "Eddy, Eddy! What are we going to do?"

Sibert called for strength, silently, and straightened his

shoulders and scarcely leaned on her at all. "Come on, Bobs. We can't give up now."

"All right, Eddy." Her voice was stronger, firmer. "It's you they'll kill, isn't it, Eddy? Not me?"

"How do you . . . know?"

"You were out of your head. You were raving."

"Yeah." Painfully they climbed the shaky steps. The old wooden boards sagged dangerously as their weight came down upon them. "They'll kill me, all right. Not you. Not if they can help it."

As they came out into sunshine pitilessly revealing an aridity of cracked concrete heaped with refuse—ashes, old boards, tin cans, bottles, boxes—Sibert felt a sort of giddy strength. It came and went, like a slow pulse, leaving blank spots.

Suddenly they were past the clutter and into an alley. It held the sleek, molded beauty of a two-year-old Cadillac Turbojet 500. As he sagged against the polished side, Barbara slid the door open.

"Where'd you get it?" he asked weakly.

"Stole it."

"It's no good. Too bright. They'll pick us up."

"I don't think so. Anyway, there's no time to change. Get in the back. Curl up on the floor."

The car felt wonderfully cool

against his hot body. He tried to think of an alternative, but his brain wouldn't work. He let Barbara help him into the car. He sagged gratefully to the floor. His chest felt sticky and hot; he was bleeding again.

There were suitcases in the back seat. Barbara stacked them over him carefully until he was completely hidden.

A single spot of sunlight filtered through. He watched it mindlessly as the car started and then moved away with the powerful acceleration of the 500-horsepower turbine. As the car moved, the spot of light jiggled and swayed. Sibert slept.

When he woke, the car was stopped and a harsh voice was saying, close to his ear, "Sorry, miss. My orders are to stop all cars leaving the city. We're looking for a wounded man. He's got someone with him."

They didn't know about Barbara, then, Sibert thought, or how badly he was injured. They were far behind.

Cold reason crept in. Optimism was foolish. They were powerful enough to command the aid of the police; discovery was only a few feet away. And they would know a great deal more as soon as the doctor recovered consciousness. It would have been wiser to kill him.

"Then I can't help you." Bar-

bara's voice was brittle and bell-clear. "Wounded men are not my specialty. I like them like you, officer—strong and able. But," she added carelessly, "you can look if you want to."

The policeman chuckled. "Don't tempt me. You're not hiding him under your skirt, I bet. And there's not much else in this buggy but engine. What'll she do on a straightaway?"

"I've had her up to two hundred myself," Barbara said casually.

"I don't believe it." There was awe in his voice.

"Watch this!"

The car took off like a rocket. In a few seconds the tires began to hum. Sibert felt the car lighten as air rushing past the stubby, winglike stabilizer fins gave them lift. The acceleration continued long past the time he was sure it would stop.

Was it going to be that easy? he thought.

The acceleration eased. They cruised along, wheels whining. It made a kind of lullaby that sang Sibert back to sleep.

He woke with a start that hurt his chest. The car had stopped again, and the whine was gone.

For the second time, he thought: *I'm going to die.* The doctor had said so. With a clarity he had not known since the bullet had hit him, he thought: *Mrs. Gentry's bullet went*

through a lung. I'm bleeding to death inside. Every movement makes it more certain.

He felt a petulant anger at Barbara, who held his life so lightly, who cared so little if he lived or died, who made him stagger blindly in search of a hiding place, dying on his feet.

Prompt medical attention could have saved him. That's what the doctor had implied.

She had given him blood, true. But what was one pint of blood when the thick, red life fluid was leaking from him so persistently, so inevitably. Even the blood of an immortal.

Futile anger rose higher. *Damn her!* he thought. *I am dying, and she will live forever.*

Dying was a strange thing, much like birth, filled with long drowsings and gray, half-conscious awakenings. Each time the grayness lifted for a moment, Sibert was surprised that he was still alive. The remnants of life drifted away in a long doze, until at last he came finally, completely, to full, cool wakefulness.

Gray light drifted through a dusty window pane and lay across the many-colored squares of the heavy comforter that pressed down on him. *I am going to live,* he thought.

He turned his head. Barbara was asleep in a heavy chair beside his bed. Its old upholstery

was ripped and torn; stuffing had pushed through, gray and ugly.

Like Barbara. She was asleep. Her face was haggard with fatigue and unattractive. Her clothing was wrinkled and dirty. Sibert disliked looking at her. He would have looked away, but her eyes opened. Sibert smiled.

"You're better," she said huskily. Her hand touched his forehead. "The fever's gone. You're going to get well."

"I think you're right," he said weakly. "Thanks to you. How long?"

She understood. "A week. Go back to sleep now."

He nodded and closed his eyes and fell into a deep, dark, refreshing pool. The next time he woke, there was food, a rich chicken broth that went down smoothly and warmly. With it went strength.

There was strength for more talk.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"An old dirt farm. Abandoned ten years or more, I imagine." She had found time to wash and change her clothing for a dress she must have discovered in a closet; it was old, but at least it was clean. "Hydroponics probably drove the farmer out of business. This road's pretty deserted. I don't think anyone saw me drive in. I hid the car in the barn. There's chickens nesting there—half wild but not too

bright. Who were those people you shot?"

"Later," he said. "First—do you remember your father?"

She shook her head puzzledly. "I didn't have a father. Not a real father. Does that matter?"

"Not to me. Didn't your mother tell you anything about him?"

"Not much. She died when I was ten."

"Then why did you insist that the doctor use your blood for the transfusion?"

Barbara studied the old wooden floor for a moment. When she looked back at Sibert, her light-brown eyes were steady. "One thing my mother told me—she made me promise never to tell anyone. It seemed terribly important."

Sibert smiled gently. "You don't have to tell me."

"I want to," she said quickly. "That's what love is, isn't it—wanting to share everything, to keep nothing back?" She smiled shyly. "It was my legacy, my mother said. What my father had given me. His blood. There was a kind of magic to it which would keep me young, which would never let me grow old. If I gave it to anyone, it would help them grow well again or young again. But if I ever told anyone or let anyone take a sample of my blood—the magic might go away."

Sibert's smile broadened.

"You're laughing at me," she

said, withdrawing. "You're thinking that it was only a little girl's make-believe or that my mother wasn't quite sane."

"No, no."

"Maybe it was make-believe," she said softly, her eyes distant. "Maybe it was only to keep a plain little girl from crying because she was not beautiful, because no one wanted to play with her. Maybe it was meant to convince her that she was really a princess in disguise, that under the ugly duckling was a beautiful swan. I believed it then. And when you were dying I believed in it again, I wanted to believe that I had this power to save you, that the magic was real."

"Your mother was right," Sibert said sleepily. "You are a princess, a swan. The magic is real. Next time. . . ."

Next time there was the white meat of chicken for Sibert to eat with broth that had egg drops cooked in it. He sat up for a little. There was only a twinge of pain in his chest and a muscular ache in his shoulder.

It tired him quickly, and he sank back to his pillow after a few minutes. "Your mother was right," he repeated. "Not in any fairy tale sense. In a real, practical way, you have new blood, whose immunity factors—the gamma globulins—can repel cellular degeneration as if death itself were a disease."

He told her the story of Marshall Cartwright, the fabulous creature who had gone secretly about the country to father an immortal race. He told her about the Institute and the men who had founded it and its purpose. He told her that he had been an unwitting part of it until he had found, by accident, what all the rest had been looking for.

"How did you find me?" she asked, her face pale.

"I was going through some old medical records, doctor's notes, case histories, that sort of thing. One of them was for a maternity case: Janice McFarland, unmarried. She had given birth to a daughter, Barbara. She needed blood; she was dying. The attending physician was a Dr. Russell Pearce. He must have known your father."

"Why?"

"I found this note stuck to the back of one of the lab reports: 'Baby fine but mother dying. Contact, Cartwright. Only chance.'"

"That seems like such a small thing."

"When I forced the information out of Locke, I knew I was right. It all fitted together."

"You had traced me before then," she said.

"Yes," he said quietly, "but a funny thing happened: I fell in love with the girl I was searching for."

Her face changed. "Oh, thank God!" she said prayerfully. "For a little while I was afraid—"

"That I was a vampire, interested only in your blood?" Si-bert shook his head chidingly. "Bobs! Bobs!"

"I'm sorry." She squeezed his hand repentantly. "Then you came back for me," she prompted.

"Les—that's the only name I knew him by—was waiting for me, watching from his first floor apartment. And Mrs. Gentry was watching him, probably without knowing what his job was."

"Then he was going to shoot you because you wouldn't tell him my name," Barbara asked.

"No, not that. He knew I wouldn't tell. The shooting was to silence me quickly. As soon as I came directly back to the apartment building, they were sure they could find you. But I shot first. Mrs. Gentry shot me and was killed when I fired back. You know the rest."

"The rest?" Slowly she smiled; her radiance seemed to brighten the room. "The rest will make up for all we have suffered. It will be so beautiful, Eddy—so lovely it seems impossible and unreal. If what you say is true, I'll never die, and I will keep you young, and we will be together forever."

"If it were only that simple," he sighed.

"Why shouldn't it be?"

"The power of wealth and the fear of death are a terrible combination. After fifty years of disappointment, the Institute smells blood. It will never leave the scent until it finds you—and eliminates me."

"Then what can we do?"

"I keep thinking: what kind of man was your father? And I think: he was a mammal, surely, not a reptile. Mammals don't leave the birth and survival of their children to the untender mercies of chance. He must have made some provision for protecting you, some hiding place, some help. As soon as I can travel, we'll begin a search."

The twelve-cylinder Ford chugged along the highway at less than eighty miles per hour. It was a dusty, rain-spattered ten-year-old, a farmer's car. It pulled up beside the old man plodding alongside the highway.

Unhurried, the old man with grizzled hair and beard marched forward until he reached the car. Behind the wheel was a middle-aged farmer. The old man nodded curtly as he got in. When the door slid shut behind him, he leaned against it, his head bent sullenly over his hands.

"Don't recognize the face," the

farmer said cheerfully. "New around here or just passing through?"

"Passing through," the old man said in a cracked voice.

"Lots of people on the road these days," the farmer said, shaking his head soberly. "Old fellows like you, some of them. Hydroponics done 'em in, and now this new fisheries stuff, farming the sea, they say—why a few more years and a man won't hardly be able to pay his medical bills with what he can grub out of the dirt. Where'd you say you was from?"

"Didn't say."

The farmer shrugged and turned his attention to the road.

Ten minutes later the Ford passed the same spot. It was going in the opposite direction. On a crossover, it turned left and pulled to a stop. The farmer had disappeared. The old man was driving.

A girl, her hair so blond it was almost colorless, stepped from behind a clump of trees and ran quickly to the car. Before she had settled herself, the car began to move. As she turned toward the old man, the speedometer stood at 120.

"Why did you change plans?" Barbara asked. "You told me to wait an hour, hitch a ride, and we would meet in Joplin."

"That was the smart way," Si-
bert said, "but I couldn't do it. I

couldn't let you get that far away from me."

He glanced at his face in the rear view mirror and nodded. The beard and the shoe blacking had changed his appearance drastically. The illness had left his face drawn and hollow. He looked old. With his training, he walked old and talked old. He almost felt old.

Barbara's frown faded in spite of her. "What did you do with the farmer?"

Sibert glanced at her quickly. With even less effort, she had been changed more. It was amazing what the old peroxide had done for her. The blondness changed her whole face. The contrast with her dark eyes was striking. Sibert felt his pulse stir.

"I knocked him out and left him behind some bushes. He'll be all right. He'll come to and get help."

"If we were going together, we might as well have taken the Cadillac."

"They've connected it with us by now, and that car could be spotted by a helicopter ten miles away. At this stage of the search, the area is blocked off in sectors. As long as we stayed still, we were safe until they started nets through. But as soon as we move we start attracting attention, setting off alarms, coming under surveillance."

Barbara looked down at her hands, clasped in her lap. "I don't like this business—shooting and stealing and slugging. . . ."

"Bobs!" Sibert said sharply. "Look at me!" Her eyes swung over; he held them. "Who does? But it's something you can't escape. It's the times we live in. It's you. You attract violence. You're the princess, remember, and you're heir to the greatest fortune on Earth—life eternal. Wherever you go, men will fight for you, lie for you, kill for you."

"I never asked for that."

"You got it as a gift at conception, life. Just as the rest of us inherited death as our portion. There's nothing you can do, nothing anyone can do."

Then there was silence.

Sibert slowed the car as they approached Joplin. "Much as I dislike it, now our only chance is to split up. They'll be looking for two people together, probably by now a man and a woman. Get out here. Catch a taxi to the airport and get a ticket on the first plane to Washington—"

"Why Washington?" she asked quickly.

"No time to explain now. Trust me. I'll try to be on the same plane. Don't recognize me or speak to me. If I'm on the plane or not, take a room in Washington at the airport motel under the same name you use for

the ticket—Maria Cassatta, say. You can pass for Italian. If I don't show up within twenty-four hours, forget me. You'll be on your own."

Silently she climbed out of the car. It moved away. Sibert didn't look back.

The old man hobbled toward the impatient transport as fast as his ancient arteries would let him go. As soon as he had climbed aboard, the jet taxied toward the end of the runway. Two minutes later it was in the air.

Settled in his seat, Sibert glanced around with doddering curiosity. As he spotted Barbara toward the back, he suppressed a sigh of relief. Her eyes met his without changing expression and returned to the paper she was reading.

For the rest of the trip, Sibert didn't look back. She couldn't get off.

Although he had spotted nobody at the Joplin airport, he was morally certain that watchers had been there. As he tottered off the plane at Washington, he was equally unsuccessful in identifying any Institute men.

He settled himself with a sigh on a bench from which he could see both the motel office and the airport waiting room. He saw Barbara register and be escorted to a distant cabin. After half an

hour there had been no one who loitered, no one who seemed to be watching. . . .

He shuffled up to the cabin door and knocked. Silently Barbara let him in. As soon as the door closed behind him, he straightened his bent back and caught her in his arms. "We made it," he said gleefully.

She was stiff and unresponsive. "Did we?"

"Of course we did. What's the matter with you?"

She pushed him away and picked up a newspaper from the table beside her. It was a Joplin paper. The headline said:

LOCAL MAN MURDERED
BESIDE OLD TOLLWAY

"You lied to me," she said without inflection.

He nodded slowly, watching her face, gauging the depth of her disillusion.

"Why did you kill him?"

"It was the safe way. I told you how it would be. I couldn't take the chance he'd raise an alarm before we got away."

"Yes, you told me."

"What I did—it was for you."

"Was it?" She closed her eyes and opened them wearily. "I suppose it was. Tell me—I want to know now—why did we come to Washington?"

Sibert shrugged helplessly. "A wild guess, a hunch, an intuition. I tried to put myself in Cartwright's place. He couldn't

have his kids watched; he couldn't even keep in touch with them or let them know what they really were. Anything unusual would show up in the Institute's files or computers, would bring down the full resources of the Institute's search upon the very persons Cartwright was trying to shield."

"What has that got to do with Washington?"

"Cartwright's problem, then, was identical with the Institute's problem: to locate his kids, who were scattered all over the United States. He had to establish his headquarters where he could keep track of nationwide phenomena: Washington. But he had no organization; the very act of organizing would alert the Instituté. He had few people he could trust—one man, perhaps, surely no more than two. Where could he place one man to do what must be done? There's only one place where one man could be effective: inside the Institute itself. As long as the Institute doesn't locate any one of Cartwright's children, the kids are reasonably safe. But if the Institute finds one of them—then Cartwright's agent can act."

Barbara nodded slowly. "It sounds logical. What are you going to do?"

"Get in touch with the agent—whichever he is. I'm going to smoke him out, and you're the smokescreen. I'll report in to the

Institute as I promised, and I'll offer to sell you—for a price. The agent will hear about it; he must be in a position where he'll hear things. And he'll get in touch with me.

"Meanwhile, as soon as I leave, check out. Get a room somewhere else—in a private home, if possible. Use another name. No, don't tell me what it is. What I don't know, Locke can't force out of me. When I want to get in touch with you, I'll put a personal in the paper. I'll address it to Marie, not Maria. That will be our signal."

"Why all the precautions?"

Sibert smiled grimly. "From now on, you're my insurance. As long as you're free, they won't dare kill me."

As soon as the taxi pulled to a stop in front of the monolith, Sibert was seized. From the car behind, four men poured out, guns in their hands. Four more came through the monolith entrance.

They went over him thoroughly, swiftly, and found the tiny automatic. They took him directly to Locke's office through a subterranean passage Sibert had never suspected.

Only Sanders, the file clerk, and Liz, Locke's secretary, were in the outer office as they passed through. They did not look at

him; it was as if he did not exist.

Locke was unchanged, but the office was different. One corner was hidden behind an impenetrable barrier of blazing light. Wordlessly, Locke waved his men out.

Sibert straightened his shoulders and smoothed down his rumpled coat. He peered futilely into the hidden corner.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"To you it doesn't matter," Locke said cheerfully. He looked at Sibert steadily. He smiled slowly. "So, the prodigal returns, bearded, weary, but more than welcome, eh? Aged considerably, too. Shall we kill the fatted calf?"

"Maybe."

Locke's face sobered. "What brought you back?"

"Money."

"What for?"

"Cartwright's kid."

"Have you got any proof it's Cartwright's kid?"

"As you know," Sibert said, unbuttoning his shirt. "I was shot a little over two weeks ago." He spread his shirt open. The scar in his chest was only a pink dimple. "Enough?"

Locke raised his old, hungry eyes to Sibert's face. "What do you want?"

"Security: money and a guarantee I'll stay alive to get the transfusions when I need them."

"The money is easy. How do you propose to get the other?"

"I want the Cartwright story, the whole thing," Sibert said evenly, "documents, affidavits, complete. I want it out where nobody can touch it. I want it fixed so that on the day I don't verify that I'm alive it gets released to every news outlet in the United States."

Locke nodded over it, considering. "You'd feel safe, then, wouldn't you? Anyone would. Then we'd have to keep you alive, no matter who else went without, no matter who had to die. It would make us all very uncomfortable, but we'd have no choice. If you had Cartwright's kid."

"I have."

"You had," Locke corrected gently. He touched the arm of his chair. "Bring in the girl."

Three men brought her into the office. Her blonde head was erect; her dark eyes swept the room. Locke nodded. The men left. As the door closed, out of the hidden corner of the room rolled a self-powered wheelchair. Huddled in it was the oldest man Sibert had ever seen.

The man was completely bald. His face and head were a wrinkled mass of gray flesh discolored with liver spots. Out of it, faded eyes stared fixedly like marbles dropped into decaying fungus. Saliva drooled uncon-

trollably from the lax mouth.

The eyes stared at Barbara. In spite of her self-control, she shrank back a little.

"Not yet, Mr. Tate," Locke crooned, as if he were speaking to a small child. "She'll need a complete physical examination before we can let her give more blood. She's given a pint recently, and her health comes first. The children, you know."

Barbara looked at her future: Mr. Tate. She shuddered. When she looked at Sibert, her face was dead and white. "Why did you do it?" she asked.

"You've got it all wrong, Bobs—" he began desperately.

"No," she said without inflection, "I've finally got it all right. I couldn't let myself wonder, before, why you should fall in love with someone as plain as I am. I was still the princess in disguise; I wouldn't let myself doubt. Now I've got it straightened out."

"No, Bobs!" Sibert protested hoarsely. "I was following the plan—"

"Your plan, maybe. You changed the ending a little. You were going to sell me, really. I should never have believed that absurd story you told me at the motel. I should have known you could never believe it yourself. You're too ruthless to understand a human impulse. You've killed three people already—"

"Bobs, I swear this wasn't part of it!"

"Oh, I believe that. You were clever, but not clever enough. They win. And you lose everything. I'm sorry for you, Eddy. I loved you. You could have had immortality. But you threw it away."

Sibert's face worked ungovernably as he looked away, unable to endure the cold knowledge in her eyes. When he looked toward her again, the three men were once more beside her. They led Barbara toward the door; she did not look back.

"Put her in the apartment below," Locke said. "You know the one. It's been ready for long enough. Man every guard station; she must be watched every second. She'll try suicide. The man who lets her succeed will take a year dying."

Then she was gone. Locke turned back to Sibert. He smiled. "You can't beat the organization; you should have known that. No one can." He paused. "You told me once that you weren't a very good actor, Sibert. You were right; we picked you up at Joplin. As soon as you left the motel, we grabbed the girl. My only problem now is what to do with you."

"I've got protection," Sibert said quickly.

"That letter you wrote before you were shot?" Locke shook his

head pityingly. "It was routine to check the mailbox after your escape."

The lips of the thing in the wheelchair moved; a thready whisper escaped into the room. Locke nodded.

"Mr. Tate says there is no problem: you must die. You saw his face. You must die, of course. The question is: how? We'd like to hand you over for murder, but you know too much.

"For now, we'll put you away. You'll have time to consider your sin. It's an old one—Adam and Eve succumbed to it, too. And it's the unforgivable one: too much knowledge."

The cell somewhere in the interminable levels beneath the monolith was bare except for the metal and canvas bunk. Sibert sat motionless on the bunk, unable to sleep, unable to stop thinking.

Somewhere he had gone wrong. And yet—he couldn't pin down any moment when he could have acted otherwise. He had to look out for himself; no one else would. He had to make the only possible deal that would give him immortality and freedom from violent death.

You can't fight organization. He and Barbara could never have escaped permanently and hidden forever. One day they would have been found and then—the end

for him, and for her, her destiny, however arrived at. She was too rare a thing ever to be a person, too valuable to be more than a possession. She was something to be used.

Sure Barbara had loved him; many women had loved him. But only because he had earned them, had played upon them, had wooed them skillfully and with eternal patience.

Where had he gone wrong?

The bolt whispered in the solid steel door, the only exit from the cell. Silently, Sibert was on his feet, his body taut. The door swung toward him.

"Liz!"

She stood in the doorway, her eyes fixed on his face. He was beside her in two strides.

"I thought you were—Liz!" he said brokenly. "Am I glad to see you!"

In her hand was an automatic. She held it out. He wrapped his hand around it and around her hand. She pulled her hand free.

"Liz!" he said. "I don't know what to—"

"Don't say it!" she said. "You've used me, just as you've used every other person you ever knew. You're a cold-blooded snake and a killer. But I couldn't let them kill you. From now on it's up to you. Don't ever let me see you again or I may kill you."

She turned and walked briskly away.

"Liz!" Sibert called after her in a whisper. "Where's the girl?"

She looked back at him, pointed a finger straight up, and was gone.

Cautiously Sibert followed her along the dark, concrete corridor. By the time he reached a ramp leading up, even her footsteps were gone. Sibert eased up one ramp. The corridor above was empty. He climbed a second ramp, puzzled by the silence.

In the second corridor a man was crumpled on the cold, concrete floor. Sibert bent over him. He was breathing heavily; there wasn't a mark on his face or head.

Violently, the corridor began to clang!

Sibert straightened instantly and ran. A few paces along the corridor, beside a window looking into a room within, a second man was stretched on the floor. Sibert didn't pause.

At the first ramp, he sprinted up again—directly into the midst of a handful of guards descending. They twisted the gun out of his hands. After a moment's discussion, two of them took him to Locke.

The office was thunder and lightning. Scenes flickered across one wall, revealing room after room of chaos and shouts and madly running men. Locke, spinning from desk to wall to phone,

barked orders into the air. In the corner Mr. Tate huddled in his chair, his parchment eyelids closed over sunken eyes.

With a final, vicious gesture, Locke gripped his chair arm, and the wall went dark. With the lightning went the thunder. In the silence, he groaned. "She's gone."

"Gone?" Sibert echoed.

"Where is she?" Locke snapped. "How did you do it?"

"What makes you think I did it?"

"Somehow you got out of your cell. Somehow you knocked out five guards and got the girl away. Why you stayed behind I don't know, but you'd better start answering questions now."

Slowly Silbert shook his head. "It's hard to find the hen that lays the golden eggs," he said softly, "but it's even harder to keep her."

"Take him to the interrogation room," Locke snapped.

The guards gripped his arms tighter. The thing in the corner rolled forward; its mouth opened.

"Wait!" Locke said. The guards hesitated. "Mr. Tate is right. You're a stubborn man, Sibert, and you're our only link to the girl. We'll work with you. If necessary we'll pay your price. Meanwhile you'll be watched. You'll have no chance to escape. One thing I want to know: who helped you?"

"Isn't there someone else missing?" Sibert asked quietly.

"Sanders," Locke growled. "It couldn't be Sanders. He's been here twenty years."

"Well?" Sibert said, shrugging. He would save Liz; she might come in handy once more.

He had lost Barbara, but he had won a reprieve. It would last as long as the patience of men who are dying, day by day, and cannot face the night.

They would not catch Barbara now. Not the girl who had snatched a mortally wounded man from among them and hidden him away and nursed him back to health, who had only been caught because that man had delivered her into their hands.

She was wiser now. She would trust no one. It was a lesson immortals should learn early.

Sometime soon, Sibert thought, he would have one chance for escape; he must be ready for it. He would play their game and wait and watch. and before they learned that he'd had nothing to

do with Barbara's escape, his chance would come.

Afterwards would not be pleasant. For as long as his furtive life should last, he would be a fugitive from powerful, fear-driven men, and he would be driven, himself, to a fruitless search for a lost princess disguised as an ordinary mortal—who held a priceless gift he had thrown away.

But he would not think of that now. His mouth twisted at the irony of the way things had worked out: the implausible story he had told Barbara had been true.

Sanders! For twenty long years that colorless, nearly anonymous man had shuffled through dusty papers and waited for an opportunity that might never come. Twenty years! And Cartwright had disappeared twenty years ago! The coincidence was too striking to be accidental.

He could not blame himself. Who would have dreamed that a man who might live forever would risk eternity for a child he had never seen? **THE END**



DIPLOMAT-AT-ARMS

By KEITH LAUMER

ILLUSTRATED by SUMMERS

Retief had just one job on Northroyal—to save the galaxy from madness and war. So with a frayed cloak and an old horse and a packet in his saddlebags—not to mention blood, guts and brains—he set out.

THE cold white sun of Northroyal glared on pale dust and vivid colors in the narrow raucous street. Retief rode slowly, unconscious of the huckster's shouts, the kaleidoscope of smells, the noisy milling crowd. His thoughts were on events of long ago on distant worlds; thoughts that set his features in narrow-eyed grimness. His bony, powerful horse, unguided, picked his way carefully, with flaring nostrils, wary eyes alert in the turmoil.

The mount sidestepped a darting gamin and Retief leaned forward, patted the sleek neck. The job had some compensations, he thought; it was good to sit on a fine horse again, to shed the grey business suit . . .

A dirty-faced man pushed

a fruit cart almost under the animal's head; the horse shied, knocked over the cart. At once a muttering crowd began to gather around the heavy-shouldered grey-haired man. He reined in and sat scowling, an ancient brown cape over his shoulders, a covered buckler slung at the side of the worn saddle, a scarred silver-worked claymore strapped across his back in the old cavalier fashion.

Retief hadn't liked this job when he had first heard of it. He had gone alone on madman's errands before, but that had been long ago—a phase of his career that should have been finished. And the information he had turned up in his background research had broken his professional detachment. Now the locals were

trying an old tourist game on him; ease the outlander into a spot, then demand money . . .

Well, Retief thought, this was as good a time as any to start playing the role; there was a hell of a lot here in the quaint city of Fragonard that needed straightening out.

"Make way, you rabble!" he roared suddenly, "or by the chains of the sea-god I'll make a path through you!" He spurred the horse; neck arching, the mount stepped daintily forward.

The crowd made way reluctantly before him. "Pay for the merchandise you've destroyed," called a voice.

"Let peddlers keep a wary eye for their betters," snorted the man loudly, his eye roving over the faces before him. A tall fellow with long yellow hair stepped squarely into his path.

"There are no rabble or peddlers here," he said angrily. "Only true cavaliers of the Clan Imperial . . ."

The mounted man leaned from his saddle to stare into the eyes of the other. His seamed brown face radiated scorn. "When did a true cavalier turn to commerce? If you were trained to the Code you'd know a gentleman doesn't soil his hands with

penny-grubbing, and that the Emperor's highroad belongs to the mounted knight. So clear your rubbish out of my path, if you'd save it."

"Climb down off that nag," shouted the tall young man, reaching for the bridle. "I'll show you some practical knowledge of the Code. I challenge you to stand and defend yourself."

In an instant the thick barrel of an antique Imperial Guards power gun was in the grey-haired man's hand. He leaned negligently on the high pommel of his saddle with his left elbow, the pistol laid across his forearm pointing unwaveringly at the man before him.

The hard old face smiled grimly. "I don't soil my hands in street brawling with new-hatched nobodies," he said. He nodded toward the arch spanning the street ahead. "Follow me through the arch, if you call yourself a man and a Cavalier." He moved on then; no one hindered him. He rode in silence through the crowd, pulled up at the gate barring the street. This would be the first real test of his cover identity. The papers which had gotten him through Customs and Immigration at Fragonard Spaceport the day before had been burned along with

the civilian clothes. From here on he'd be getting by on the uniform and a cast-iron nerve.

A purse-mouthed fellow wearing the uniform of a Lieutenant-Ensign in the Household Escort Regiment looked him over, squinted his eyes, smiled sourly.

"What can I do for you, Uncle?" He spoke carelessly, leaning against the engraved buttress mounting the wrought-iron gate. Yellow and green sunlight filtered down through the leaves of the giant linden trees bordering the cobble street.

The grey-haired man stared down at him. "The first thing you can do, Lieutenant-Ensign," he said in a voice of cold steel, "is come to a position of attention."

The thin man straightened, frowning. "What's that?" His expression hardened. "Get down off that beast and let's have a look at your papers—if you've got any."

The mounted man didn't move. "I'm making allowances for the fact that your regiment is made up of idlers who've never learned to soldier," he said quietly. "But having had your attention called to it, even you should recognize the insignia of a Battle Commander."

The officer stared, glancing over the drab figure of the old man. Then he saw the tarnished gold thread worked into the design of a dragon rampant, almost invisible against the faded color of the heavy velvet cape.

He licked his lips, cleared his throat, hesitated. What in name of the Tormented One would a top-ranking battle officer be doing on this thin old horse, dressed in plain worn clothing? "Let me see your papers—Commander," he said.

The Commander flipped back the cape to expose the ornate butt of the power pistol.

"Here are my credentials," he said. "Open the gate."

"Here," the Ensign spluttered, "What's this . . ."

"For a man who's taken the Emperor's commission," the old man said, "you're criminally ignorant of the courtesies due a general officer. Open the gate or I'll blow it open. You'll not deny the way to an Imperial Battle officer." He drew the pistol.

The Ensign gulped, thought fleetingly of sounding the alarm signal, of insisting on seeing papers . . . Then as the pistol came up, he closed the switch, and the gate swung

open. The heavy hooves of the gaunt horse clattered past him; he caught a glimpse of a small brand on the lean flank. Then he was staring after the retreating back of the terrible old man. Battle Commander indeed! The old fool was wearing a fortune in valuable antiques, and the animal bore the brand of a thoroughbred battle-horse. He'd better report this . . . He picked up the communicator, as a tall young man with an angry face came up to the gate.

Retief rode slowly down the narrow street lined with the stalls of suttlers, metalsmiths, weapons technicians, free-lance squires. The first obstacle was behind him. He hadn't played it very suavely, but he had been in no mood for bandying words. He had been angry ever since he had started this job; and that, he told himself, wouldn't do. He was beginning to regret his high-handedness with the crowd outside the gate. He should save the temper for those responsible, not the bystanders; and in any event, an agent of the Corps should stay cool at all times. That was essentially the same criticism that Magnan had handed him along with the assignment, three months ago.

"The trouble with you, Retief," Magnan had said, "is that you are unwilling to accept the traditional restraints of the Service; you conduct yourself too haughtily, too much in the manner of a free agent . . ."

His reaction, he knew, had only proved the accuracy of his superior's complaint. He should have nodded penitent agreement, indicated that improvement would be striven for earnestly; instead, he had sat expressionless, in a silence which inevitably appeared antagonistic.

He remembered how Magnan had moved uncomfortably, cleared his throat, and frowned at the papers before him. "Now, in the matter of your next assignment," he said, "we have a serious situation to deal with in an area that could be critical."

Retief almost smiled at the recollection. The man had placed himself in an amusing dilemma. It was necessary to emphasize the great importance of the job at hand, and simultaneously to avoid letting Retief have the satisfaction of feeling that he was to be entrusted with anything vital; to express the lack of confidence the Corps felt in him while at the same time invoking his awareness of the great

trust he was receiving. It was strange how Magnan could rationalize his personal dislike into a righteous concern for the best interests of the Corps.

Magnan had broached the nature of the assignment obliquely, mentioning his visit as a tourist to Northroyal, a charming, backward little planet settled by Cavaliers, refugees from the breakup of the Empire of the Lily.

Retief knew the history behind Northroyal's tidy, proud, tradition-bound society. When the Old Confederation broke up, dozens of smaller governments had grown up among the civilized worlds. For a time, the Lily Empire had been among the most vigorous of them, comprising Twenty-one worlds, and supporting an excellent military force under the protection of which the Lilyan merchant fleet had carried trade to a thousand far-flung worlds.

When the Concordiat had come along, organizing the previously sovereign states into a new Galactic jurisdiction, the Empire of the Lily had resisted, and had for a time held the massive Concordiat fleets at bay. In the end, of course, the gallant but outnumbered Lilyan forces had been driven back to the gates of the home world. The planet of Lily

had been saved catastrophic bombardment only by a belated truce which guaranteed self-determination to Lily on the cessation of hostilities, disbandment of the Lilyan fleet, and the exile of the entire membership of the Imperial Suite, which, under the Lilyan clan tradition, had numbered over ten thousand individuals. Every man, woman, and child who could claim even the most distant blood relationship to the Emperor, together with their servants, dependents, retainers, and proteges, were included. The move took weeks to complete, but at the end of it the Cavaliers, as they were known, had been transported to an uninhabited, cold, sea-world, which they named Northroyal. A popular bit of lore in connection with the exodus had it that the ship bearing the Emperor himself had slipped away en route to exile, and that the ruler had sworn that he would not return until the day he could come with an army of liberation. He had never been heard from again.

The land area of the new world, made up of innumerable islands, totalled half a million square miles. Well stocked with basic supplies

and equipment, the cavaliers had set to work and turned their rocky fief into a snug, well integrated—if tradition ridden—society, and today exported seafoods, fine machinery, and tourist literature.

It was in the latter department that Northroyal was best known. Tales of the pomp and color, the quaint inns and good food, the beautiful girls, the brave display of royal cavalry, and the fabulous annual Tournament of the Lily attracted a goodly number of sightseers, and the Cavalier Line was now one of the planet's biggest foreign-exchange earners.

Magnan had spoken of Northroyal's high industrial potential, and her well-trained civilian corps of space navigators.

"The job of the Corps," Retief interrupted, "is to seek out and eliminate threats to the peace of the Galaxy. How does a little story-book world like Northroyal get into the act?"

"More easily than you might imagine," Magnan said. "Here you have a close-knit society, proud, conscious of a tradition of military power, empire. A clever rabble-rouser using the right appeal would step into a ready-made situa-

tion there. It would take only an order on the part of the planetary government to turn the factories to war production, and convert the merchant fleet into a war fleet—and we'd be faced with a serious power imbalance—a storm center."

"I think you're talking nonsense, Mr. Minister," Retief said bluntly. "They've got more sense than that. They're not so far gone on tradition as to destroy themselves. They're a practical people."

Magnan drummed his fingers on the desk top. "There's one factor I haven't covered yet," he said. "There has been what amounts to a news blackout from Northroyal during the last six months . . ."

Retief snorted. "What news?"

Magnan had been enjoying the suspense. "Tourists have been having great difficulty getting to Northroyal," he said. "Fragonard, the capital, is completely closed to outsiders. We managed, however, to get an agent in." He paused, gazing at Retief. "It seems," he went on, "that the rightful Emperor has turned up."

Retief narrowed his eyes. "What's that?" he said sharply.

Magnan drew back, intimidated by the power of Retief's

tone, annoyed by his own reaction. In his own mind, Magnan was candid enough to know that this was the real basis for his intense dislike for his senior agent. It was an instinctive primitive fear of physical violence. Not that Retief had ever assaulted anyone; but he had an air of mastery that made Magnan feel trivial.

"The Emperor;" Magnan repeated. "The traditional story is that he was lost on the voyage to Northroyal. There was a legend that he had slipped out of the hands of the Concordiat in order to gather new support for a counter-offensive, hurl back the invader, all that sort of thing."

"The Concordiat collapsed of its own weight within a century," Retief said. "There's no invader to hurl back. Northroyal is free and independent like every other world."

"Of course, of course," Magnan said. "But you're missing the emotional angle, Retief. It's all very well to be independent; but what about the dreams of Empire, the vanished glory, Destiny, et cetera?"

"What about them?"

"That's all our agent heard; it's everywhere. The news strips are full of it. Video is

playing it up; everybody's talking it. The returned Emperor seems to be a clever propagandist; the next step will be a full scale mobilization. And we're not equipped to handle that."

"What am I supposed to do about all this?"

"Your orders are, and I quote, to proceed to Fragnard and there employ such measures as shall be appropriate to negate the present trend toward an expansionist sentiment among the populace." Magnan passed a document across the desk to Retief for his inspection.

The orders were brief, and wasted no wordage on details. As an officer of the Corps with the rank of Counsellor, Retief enjoyed wide latitude, and broad powers—and corresponding responsibility in the event of failure. Retief wondered how this assignment had devolved on him, among the thousands of Corps agents scattered through the Galaxy. Why was one man being handed a case which on the face of it should call for a full mission?

"This looks like quite an undertaking for a single agent, Mr. Minister," Retief said.

"Well, of course, if you

don't feel you can handle it..." Magnan looked solemn.

Retief looked at him, smiling faintly. Magnan's tactics had been rather obvious. Here was one of those nasty jobs which could easily pass in reports as routine if all went well; but even a slight mistake could mean complete failure, and failure meant war; and the agent who had let it happen would be finished in the Corps.

There was danger in the scheme for Magnan, too. The blame might reflect back on him. Probably he had plans for averting disaster after Retief had given up. He was too shrewd to leave himself out in the open. And for that matter, Retief reflected, too good an agent to let the situation get out of hand.

No, it was merely an excellent opportunity to let Retief discredit himself, with little risk of any great credit accruing to him in the remote event of success.

Retief could, of course, refuse the assignment, but that would be the end of his career. He would never be advanced to the rank of Minister, and age limitations would force his retirement in a year or two. That would be an easy victory for Magnan.

Retief liked his work as an

officer-agent of the Diplomatic Corps, that ancient supranational organization dedicated to the controvention of war. He had made his decision long ago, and he had learned to accept his life as it was, with all its imperfections. It was easy enough to complain about the petty intrigues, the tyrannies of rank, the small inequities. But these were merely a part of the game, another challenge to be met and dealt with. The overcoming of obstacles was Jame Retief's specialty. Some of the obstacles were out in the open, the recognized difficulties inherent in any tough assignment. Others were concealed behind a smoke-screen of personalities and efficiency reports; and both were equally important. You did your job in the field, and then you threaded your way through the maze of Corps politics. And if you couldn't handle the job—any part of it—you'd better find something else to do.

He had accepted the assignment of course, after letting Magnan wonder for a few minutes; and then for two months he had buried himself in research, gathering every scrap of information, direct and indirect, that the massive files of the Corps would yield. He had soon found himself

immersed in the task, warming to its challenge, fired with emotions ranging from grief to rage as he ferreted out the hidden pages in the history of the exiled Cavaliers.

He had made his plan, gathered a potent selection of ancient documents and curious objects; a broken chain of gold, a tiny key, a small silver box. And now he was here, inside the compound of the Grand Corrida.

Everything here in these ways surrounding and radiating from the Field of the Emerald Crown—the arena itself—was devoted to the servicing and supplying of the thousands of First Day contenders in the Tournament of the Lily, and the housing and tending of the dwindling number of winners who stayed on for the following days. There were tiny eating places, taverns, inns; all consciously antique in style, built in imitation of their counterparts left behind long ago on far off Lily.

"Here you are, pop, first-class squire," called a thin red-haired fellow.

"Double up and save credits," called a short dark man. "First-day contract . . ."

Shouts rang back and forth across the alley-like street as the stall keepers scented a cus-

tomers. Retief ignored them, moved on toward the looming wall of the arena. Ahead, a slender youth stood with folded arms before his stall, looking toward the approaching figure on the black horse. He leaned forward, watching Retief intently, then straightened, turned and grabbed up a tall narrow body shield from behind him. He raised the shield over his head, and as Retief came abreast, called "Battle officer!"

Retief reined in the horse, looked down at the youth.

"At your service, sir," the young man said. He stood straight and looked Retief in the eye. Retief looked back. The horse minced, tossed his head.

"What is your name, boy?" Retief asked.

"Fitzraven, sir."

"Do you know the Code?"

"I know the Code, sir."

Retief stared at him, studying his face, his neatly cut uniform of traditional Imperial green, the old but well oiled leather of his belt and boots.

"Lower your shield, Fitzraven," he said. "You're engaged." He swung down from his horse. "The first thing I want is care for my mount. His name is Danger-by-Night. And then I want an inn for myself."

"I'll care for the horse myself, Commander," Fitzraven said. "And the Commander will find good lodging at the sign of the Phoenix-in-Dexter-Chief; quarters are held ready for my client." The squire took the bridle, pointing toward the inn a few doors away.

Two hours later, Retief came back to the stall, a thirty-two ounce steak and a bottle of Neauveau Beaujolais having satisfied a monumental appetite induced by the long ride down from the spaceport north of Fragonard. The plain banner he had carried in his saddlebag fluttered now from the staff above the stall. He moved through the narrow room to a courtyard behind, and stood in the doorway watching as Fitzraven curried the dusty hide of the lean black horse. The saddle and fittings were laid out on a heavy table, ready for cleaning. There was clean straw in the stall where the horse stood, and an empty grain bin and water bucket indicated the animal had been well fed and watered.

Retief nodded to the squire, and strolled around the courtyard staring up at the deep blue sky of early evening above the irregular line of

roofs and chimneys, noting the other squires, the variegated mounts stabled here, listening to the hubbub of talk, the clatter of crockery from the kitchen of the inn. Fitzraven finished his work and came over to his new employer.

"Would the Commander like to sample the night life in the Grand Corrida?"

"Not tonight," Retief said. "Let's go up to my quarters; I want to learn a little more about what to expect."

Retief's room, close under the rafters on the fourth floor of the inn, was small but adequate, with a roomy wardrobe and a wide bed. The contents of his saddlebags were already in place in the room.

Retief looked around. "Who gave you permission to open my saddlebags?"

Fitzraven flushed slightly. "I thought the Commander would wish to have them unpacked," he said stiffly.

"I looked at the job the other squires were doing on their horses," Retief said. "You were the only one who was doing a proper job of tending the animal. Why the special service?"

"I was trained by my father," Fitzraven said. "I serve only true knights, and I perform my duties honorably. If

the Commander is dissatisfied”

“How do you know I’m a true knight?”

“The Commander wears the uniform and weapons of one of the oldest Imperial Guards Battle Units, the Iron Dragon,” Fitzraven said. “And the Commander rides a battle horse, true bred.”

“How do you know I didn’t steal them?”

Fitzraven grinned suddenly. “They fit the Commander too well.”

Retief smiled. “All right, son, you’ll do,” he said. “Now brief me on the First Day. I don’t want to miss anything. And you may employ the personal pronoun.”

For an hour Fitzraven discussed the order of events for the elimination contests of the First Day of the Tournament of the Lily, the strategies that a clever contender could employ to husband his strength, the pitfalls into which the unwary might fall.

The tournament was the culmination of a year of smaller contests held throughout the equatorial chain of populated islands. The Northroyalans had substituted various forms of armed combat for the sports practiced on most worlds; a compensation for the lost empire, doubtless,

a primitive harking-back to an earlier, more glorious day.

Out of a thousand First Day entrants, less than one in ten would come through to face the Second Day. Of course, the First Day events were less lethal than those to be encountered farther along in the three day tourney, Retief learned; there would be a few serious injuries in the course of the opening day, and those would be largely due to the clumsiness or ineptitude on the part of the entrants.

There were no formal entrance requirements, Fitzraven said, other than proof of minimum age and status in the Empire. Not all the entrants were natives of Northroyal; many came from distant worlds, long scattered descendants of the citizens of the shattered Lily Empire. But all competed for the same prizes; status in the Imperial peerage, the honors of the Field of the Emerald crown, and Imperial grants of land, wealth to the successful.

“Will you enter the First Day events, sir,” Fitzraven asked, “or do you have a second or third day certification?”

“Neither,” Retief said. “We’ll sit on the sidelines and watch.”

Fitzraven looked surprised. It had somehow not occurred to him that the old man was not to be a combatant. And it was too late to get seats . . .

"How . . ." Fitzraven began, after a pause.

"Don't worry," Retief said. "We'll have a place to sit."

Fitzraven fell silent, tilted his head to one side, listening. Loud voices, muffled by walls, the thump of heavy feet.

"Something is up," Fitzraven said. "Police." He looked at Retief.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Retief said, "if they were looking for me. Let's go find out."

"We need not meet them," the squire said. "There is another way . . ."

"Never mind," Retief said, "as well now as later." He winked at Fitzraven and turned to the door.

Retief stepped off the lift into the crowded common room, Fitzraven at his heels. Half a dozen men in dark blue tunics and tall shakos moved among the patrons, staring at faces. By the door Retief saw the thin-mouthed Ensign he had overawed at the gate. The fellow saw him at the same moment and plucked at the sleeve of the nearest policeman, pointing.

The man dropped a hand to

his belt, and at once the other policeman turned, followed his glance to Retief. They moved toward him with one accord. Retief stood waiting.

The first cop planted himself before Retief, looking him up and down. "Your papers!" he snapped.

Retief smiled easily. "I am a peer of the Lily and a Battle officer of the Imperial forces," he said. "On what pretext are you demanding papers of me, Captain?"

The cop raised his eyebrows.

"Let's say you are charged with unauthorized entry into the controlled area of the Grand Corrida, and with impersonating an Imperial officer," he said. "You didn't expect to get away with it, did you grandpa?" The fellow smiled sardonically.

"Under the provisions of the Code," Retief said, "the status of a peer may not be questioned, nor his actions interfered with except by Imperial Warrant. Let me see yours, Captain. And I suggest you assume a more courteous tone when addressing your superior officer." Retief's voice hardened to a whip crack with the last words.

The policeman stiffened, scowled. His hand dropped to the nightstick at his belt.

"None of your insolence, old man," he snarled. "Papers! Now!"

Retief's hand shot out, gripped the officer's hand over the stick. "Raise that stick," he said quietly, "and I'll assuredly beat out your brains with it." He smiled calmly into the captain's bulging eyes. The captain was a strong man. He threw every ounce of his strength into the effort to bring up his arm, to pull free of the old man's grasp. The crowd of customers, the squad of police, stood silently, staring, uncertain of what was going on. Retief stood steady; the officer strained, reddened. The old man's arm was like cast steel.

"I see you are using your head, Captain," Retief said. "Your decision not to attempt to employ force against a peer was an intelligent one."

The cop understood. He was being offered an opportunity to save a little face. He relaxed slowly.

"Very well, uh, sir," he said stiffly. "I will assume you can establish your identity properly; kindly call at the commandant's office in the morning."

Retief released his hold and the officer hustled his men out, shoving the complaining Ensign ahead. Fitzraven caught Retief's eye and grinned.

"Empty pride is a blade with no hilt," he said. "A humble man would have yelled for help."

Retief turned to the barman. "Drinks for all," he called. A happy shout greeted this announcement. They had all enjoyed seeing the police outfaced.

"The cops don't seem to be popular here," the old man said.

Fitzraven sniffed. "A law-abiding subject parks illegally for five minutes, and they are on him like flies after dead meat; but let his car be stolen by lawless hoodlums—they are nowhere to be seen."

"That has a familiar sound," Retief said. He poured out a tumbler of vodka, looked at Fitzraven.

"Tomorrow," he said. "A big day."

A tall blonde young man near the door looked after him with bitter eyes.

"All right, old man," he muttered. "We'll see then."

The noise of the crowd came to Retief's ears as a muted rumble through the massive pile of the amphitheatre above. A dim light filtered from the low-ceilinged corridor into the cramped office of the assistant Master of the Games.

"If you know your charter,"

Retief said, "you will recall that a Battle Commander enjoys the right to observe the progress of the games from the official box. I claim that privilege."

"I know nothing of this," the cadaverous official replied impatiently. "You must obtain an order from the Master of the Games before I can listen to you." He turned to another flunkey, opened his mouth to speak. A hand seized him by the shoulder, lifted him bodily from his seat. The man's mouth remained open in shock.

Retief held the stricken man at arms length, then drew him closer. His eyes blazed into the gaping eyes of the other. His face was white with fury.

"Little man," he said in a strange, harsh voice, "I go now with my groom to take my place in the official box. Read your Charter well before you interfere with me—and your Holy Book as well." He dropped the fellow with a crash, saw him slide under the desk. No one made a sound. Even Fitzraven looked pale. The force of the old man's rage had been like a lethal radiation crackling in the room.

The squire followed as Retief strode off down the corridor. He breathed deeply, wip-

ing his forehead. This was some old man he had met this year, for sure!

Retief slowed, turning to wait for Fitzraven. He smiled ruefully. "I was rough on the old goat," he said. "But officious pipsqueaks sting me like deerflies."

They emerged from the gloom of the passage into a well-situated box, too the best seats in the first row. Retief stared at the white glare and roiled dust of the arena, the banked thousands of faces looming above, and a sky of palest blue with one tiny white cloud. The gladiators stood in little groups, waiting. A strange scene, Retief thought. A scene from dim antiquity, but real, complete with the odors of fear and excitement, the hot wind that ruffled his hair, the rumbling animal sound from the thousand throats of the many-headed monster. He wondered what it was they really wanted to see here today. A triumph of skill and courage, a reaffirmation of ancient virtues, the spectacle of men who laid life on the gaming table and played for a prize called glory—or was it merely blood and death they wanted?

It was strange that this archaic ritual of the blood tournament, combining the

features of the Circus of Caesar, the joust of Medieval Terran Europe, the Olympic Games, a rodeo, and a six-day bicycle race should have come to hold such an important place in a modern culture, Retief thought. In its present form it was a much distorted version of the traditional Tournament of the Lily, through whose gauntlet the nobility of the old Empire had come. It had been a device of harsh enlightenment to insure and guarantee to every man, once each year, the opportunity to prove himself against others whom society called his betters. Through its discipline, the humblest farm lad could rise by degrees to the highest levels in the Empire. For the original Games had tested every facet of a man, from his raw courage to his finesse in strategy, from his depths of endurance under mortal stress to the quickness of his intellect, from his instinct for truth to his wiliness in eluding a complex trap of violence.

In the two centuries since the fall of the Empire, the Games had gradually become a tourist spectacle, a free-for-all, a celebration—with the added spice of danger for those who did not shrink back, and fat prizes to a few determined finalists. The Imperial

Charter was still invoked at the opening of the Games, the old Code reaffirmed; but there were few who knew or cared what the Charter and Code actually said, what terms existed there. The popular mind left such details to the regents of the tourney. And in recent months, with the once sought-after tourists suddenly and inexplicably turned away, it seemed the Games were being perverted to a purpose even less admirable . . .

Well, thought Retief, perhaps I'll bring some of the fine print into play, before I'm done.

Bugle blasts sounded beyond the high bronze gate. Then with a heavy clang it swung wide and a nervous official stepped out nodding jerkily to the front rank of today's contenders.

The column moved straight out across the field, came together with other columns to form a square before the Imperial box. High above, Retief saw banners fluttering, a splash of color from the uniforms of ranked honor guards. The Emperor himself was here briefly to open the Tournament.

Across the field the bugles rang out again; Retief recognized the *Call to Arms* and the

Imperial Salute. Then an amplified voice began the ritual reading of the Terms of the Day.

"... by the clement dispensation of his Imperial Majesty, to be conducted under the convention of Fragonard, and there be none dissenting..." The voice droned on.

It finished at last, and referees moved to their positions. Retief looked at Fitzraven. "The excitement's about to begin."

Referees handed out heavy whips, gauntlets and face shields. The first event would be an unusual one.

Retief watched as the yellow-haired combatant just below the box drew on the heavy leather glove which covered and protected the left hand and forearm, accepted the fifteen-foot lash of braided oxhide. He flipped it tentatively, laying the length out along the ground and recalling it with an effortless turn of the wrist, the frayed tip snapping like a pistol shot. The thing was heavy, Retief noted, and clumsy; the leather had no life to it.

The box had filled now; no one bothered Retief and the squire. The noisy crowd laughed and chattered, called to acquaintances in the stands and on the field below.

A bugle blasted peremptorily nearby, and white-suited referees darted among the milling entrants, shaping them into groups of five. Retief watched the blonde youth, a tall frowning man, and three others of undistinguished appearance.

Fitzraven leaned toward him. "The cleverest will hang back and let the others eliminate each other," he said in a low voice, "so that his first encounter will be for the set."

Retief nodded. A man's task here was to win his way as high as possible; every stratagem was important. He saw the blonde fellow inconspicuously edge back as a hurrying referee paired off the other four, called to him to stand by, and led the others to rings marked off on the dusty turf. A whistle blew suddenly, and over the arena the roar of sound changed tone. The watching crowd leaned forward as the hundreds of keyed up gladiators laid on their lashes in frenzied effort. Whips cracked, men howled, feet shuffled; here the crowd laughed as some clumsy fellow sprawled, yelping; there they gasped in excitement as two surly brutes flogged each other in all-out offense.

Retief saw the tip of one man's whip curl around his

opponent's ankle, snatch him abruptly off his feet. The other pair circled warily, rippling their lashes uncertainly. One backed over the line unnoticed and was led away expostulating, no blow having been struck.

The number on the field dwindled away to half within moments. Only a few dogged pairs, now bleeding from cuts, still contested the issue. A minute longer and the whistle blew as the last was settled.

The two survivors of the group below paired off now, and as the whistle blasted again, the tall fellow, still frowning, brought the other to the ground with a single sharp flick of the lash. Retief looked him over. This was a man to watch.

More whistles, and a field now almost cleared; only two men left out of each original five; the blond moved out into the circle, stared across at the other. Retief recognized him suddenly as the fellow who had challenged him outside the gate, over the spilled fruit. So he had followed through the arch.

The final whistle sounded and a hush fell over the watchers. Now the shuffle of feet could be heard clearly, the hissing breath of the weary

fighters, the creak and slap of leather.

The blonde youth flipped his lash out lightly, saw it easily evaded, stepped aside from a sharp counter-blow. He fainted, reversed the direction of his cast, and caught the other high on the chest as he dodged aside. A welt showed instantly. He saw a lightning-fast riposte on the way, sprang back. The gauntlet came up barely in time. The lash wrapped around the gauntlet, and the young fellow seized the leather, hauled sharply. The other stumbled forward. The blond brought his whip across the fellow's back in a tremendous slamming blow that sent a great fragment of torn shirt flying. Somehow the man stayed on his feet, backed off, circled. His opponent followed up, laying down one whistling whipcrack after another, trying to drive the other over the line. He had hurt the man with the cut across the back, and now was attempting to finish him easily.

He leaned away from a sluggish pass, and then Retief saw agony explode in his face as a vicious cut struck home. The blonde youth reeled in a drunken circle, out on his feet.

Slow to follow up, the enemy's lash crashed across the circle; the youth, steadying

quickly, slipped under it, struck at the other's stomach. The leather cannoned against the man, sent the remainder of his shirt fluttering in a spatter of blood. With a surge of shoulder and wrist that made the muscles creak, the blonde reversed the stroke, brought the lash back in a vicious cut aimed at the same spot. It struck, smacking with a wet explosive crack. And he struck again, again, as the fellow tottered back, fell over the line.

The winner went limp suddenly, staring across at the man who lay in the dust, pale now, moving feebly for a moment, then slackly still. There was a great deal of blood, and more blood. Retief saw with sudden shock that the man was disembowelled. That boy, thought Retief, plays for keeps.

The next two events constituting the First Day trials were undistinguished exhibitions of a two-handed version of old American Indian wrestling and a brief bout of fencing with blunt-tipped weapons. Eighty men were certified for the Second Day before noon, and Retief and Fitzraven were back in the inn room a few minutes later. "Take some time off now while I catch up on my rest,"

Retief said. "Have some solid food ready when I wake." Then he retired for the night.

With his master breathing heavily in a profound sleep, the squire went down to the common room and found a table at the back, ordered a mug of strong ale, and sat alone, thinking.

This was a strange one he had met this year. He had seen at once that he was no idler from some high-pressure world, trying to lose himself in a fantasy of the old days. And no more was he a North-royalan; there was a grim force in him, a time-engraved stamp of power that was alien to the neat well-ordered little world. And yet there was no doubt that there was more in him of the true Cavalier than in a Fragonard-born courtier. He was like some ancient warrior noble from the days of the greatness of the Empire. By the two heads, the old man was strange, and terrible in anger!

Fitzraven listened to the talk around him.

"I was just above," a blacksmith at the next table was saying. "He gutted the fellow with the lash! It was monstrous! I'm glad I'm not one of the fools who want to play at warrior. Imagine having

your insides drawn out by a rope of dirty leather!"

"The games have to be tougher now," said another. "We've lain dormant here for two centuries, waiting for something to come — some thing to set us on our way again to power and wealth..."

"Thanks, I'd rather go on living quietly as a smith and enjoying a few of the simple pleasures—there was no glory in that fellow lying in the dirt with his belly torn open you can be sure of that."

"There'll be more than torn bellies to think about, when we mount a battle fleet for Grimwold and Tania," said another.

"The Emperor has returned," snapped the war-like one. "Shall we hang back where he leads?"

The smith muttered. "His is a tortured geneology, by my judgment. I myself trace my ancestry by three lines into the old Place at Lily."

"So do we all. All the more reason we should support our Emperor."

"We live well here; we have no quarrel with other worlds. Why not leave the past to itself?"

"Our Emperor leads; we will follow. If you disapprove, enter the Lily Tournament next year and win a high

place; then your advice will be respected."

"No thanks. I like my insides to stay on the inside."

Fitzraven thought of Retief. The old man had said that he held his rank in his own right, citing no geneology. That was strange indeed. The Emperor had turned up only a year ago, presenting the Robe, the Ring, the Seal, the crown jewels, and the Imperial Book which traced his descent through five generations from the last reigning Emperor of the Old Empire.

How could it be that Retief held a commission in his own right, dated no more than thirty years ago? And the rank of Battle Commander. That was a special rank, Fitzraven remembered, a detached rank for a distinguished noble and officer of proven greatness, assigned to no one unit, but dictating his own activities.

Either Retief was a fraud . . . but Fitzraven pictured the old man, his chiseled features that time had not disguised, his soldier's bearing, his fantastic strength, his undoubtedly authentic equipage. Whatever the explanation, he was a true knight. That was enough.

Retief awoke refreshed, and

ravenous. A great rare steak and a giant tankard of autumn ale were ready on the table. He ate, ordered more and ate again. Then he stretched, shook himself, no trace of yesterday's fatigue remaining. His temper was better, too, he realized. He was getting too old to exhaust himself.

"It's getting late, Fitzraven," he said. "Let's be going."

They arrived at the arena and took their places in the official box in time to watch the first event, a cautious engagement with swords.

After four more events and three teams of determined but colorless competition, only a dozen men were left on the field awaiting the next event, including the tall blonde youth who Retief had been watching since he had recognized him. He himself, he reflected, was the reason for the man's presence here; and he had acquitted himself well.

Retief saw a burly warrior carrying a two-handed sword paired off now against the blonde youth. The fellow grinned as he moved up to face the other.

This would be a little different, the agent thought watching; this fellow was dangerous. Yellow-hair moved in, his weapon held level across his

chest. The big man lashed out suddenly with the great sword, and the other jumped back, then struck backhanded at his opponent's shoulder, nicked him lightly, sliding back barely in time to avoid a return swing. The still grinning man moved in, the blade chopping the air before him in a whistling figure eight. He pressed his man back, the blade never pausing.

There was no more room; the blonde fellow jumped sideways, dropping the point of his sword in time to intercept a vicious cut. He backstepped; he couldn't let that happen again. The big man was very strong.

The blade was moving again now, the grin having faded a little. He'll have to keep away from him, keep circling, Retief thought. The big fellow's pattern is to push his man back to the edge, then pick him off as he tries to sidestep. He'll have to keep space between them.

The fair-haired man backed, watching for an opening. He jumped to the right, and as the other shifted to face him, leaped back to the left and catching the big man at the end of his reach to the other side, slashed him across the ribs and kept moving. The man roared, twisting around

in vicious cuts at the figure that darted sideways, just out of range. Then the blond brought his claymore across in a low swing that struck solidly across the back of the other's legs, with a noise like a butcher separating ribs with a cleaver.

Like a marionette with his strings cut, the man folded to his knees, sprawled. The other man stepped back, as surgeons' men swarmed up to tend the fallen fighter. There were plenty of them available now; so far the casualties had been twice normal. On the other mounds in view, men were falling. The faint-hearted had been eliminated; the men who were still on their feet were determined, or desperate. There would be no more push-overs.

"Only about six left," Fitzraven called.

"This has been a rather unusual tournament so far," Retief said. "That young fellow with the light hair seems to be playing rough, forcing the pace."

"I have never seen such a business-like affair," Fitzraven said. "The weak-disposed have been frightened out, and the fighters cut down with record speed. At this rate there will be none left for the Third Day."

There was delay on the field, as referees and other officials hurried back and forth; then an announcement boomed out. The Second Day was officially concluded. The six survivors would be awarded Second Day certificates, and would be eligible for the Third and Last Day tomorrow.

Retief and Fitzraven left the box, made their way through the crowd back to the inn.

"See that Danger-by-Night is well fed and exercised," Retief said to the squire. "And check over all of my gear thoroughly. I wish to put on my best appearance tomorrow; it will doubtless be my last outing of the kind for some time."

Fitzraven hurried away to tend his chores, while Retief ascended to his room to pore over the contents of his dispatch case far into the night.

The Third Day had dawned grey and chill, and an icy wind whipped across the arena. The weather had not discouraged the crowd, however. The stands were packed and the overflow of people stood in the aisles, perched high on the back walls, crowding every available space. Banners flying from the im-

perial box indicated the presence of the royal party. This was the climactic day. The field, by contrast, was almost empty; two of the Second Day winners had not re-entered for today's events, having apparently decided that they had had enough honor for one year. They would receive handsome prizes, and respectable titles; that was enough.

The four who had come to the arena today to stake their winning and their lives on their skill at arms would be worth watching Retief thought. There was the blonde young fellow, still unmarked; a great swarthy ruffian; a tall broad man of perhaps thirty; and a squat bowlegged fellow with enormous shoulders and long arms. They were here to win or die.

From the officials' box Retief and Fitzraven had an excellent view of the arena, where a large circle had been marked out. The officials seated nearby had given them cold glances as they entered, but no one had attempted to interfere. Apparently, they had accepted the situation. Possibly, Retief thought, they had actually studied the charter. He hoped they had studied it carefully. It would make things easier.

Announcements boomed, of-

ficials moved about, fanfares blasted, while Retief sat absorbed in thought. The scene reminded him of things he had long forgotten, days long gone, of his youth, when he had studied the martial skills, serving a long apprenticeship under his world's greatest masters. It had been his father's conviction that nothing so trained the eye and mind and body as fencing, judo, savate, and the disciplines of the arts of offense, and defense.

He had abandoned a priceless education when he had left his home to seek his fortune in the main stream of galactic culture, but it had stood him in good stead on more than one occasion. An agent of the Corps could not afford to let himself decline into physical helplessness, and Retief had maintained his skills as well as possible. He leaned forward now, adjusting his binoculars as the bugles rang out. Few in the crowd were better qualified than Retief to judge today's performance. It would be interesting to see how the champions handled themselves on the field.

The first event was about to begin, as the blonde warrior was paired off with the bow-

legged man. The two had been issued slender foils, and now faced each other, blades crossed. A final whistle blew, and blade clashed on blade. The squat man was fast on his feet, bouncing around in a semi-circle before his taller antagonist, probing his defense with great energy. The blonde man backed away slowly, fending off the rain of blows with slight motions of his foil. He jumped back suddenly, and Retief saw a red spot grow on his thigh. The ape-like fellow was more dangerous than he had appeared.

Now the blonde man launched his attack, beating aside the weapon of the other and striking in for the throat, only to have his point deflected at the last instant. The short man backed now, giving ground reluctantly. Suddenly he dropped into a grotesque crouch, and lunged under the other's defense in a desperate try for a quick kill. It was a mistake; the taller man whirled aside, and his blade flicked delicately once. The bowlegged man slid out flat on his face.

"What happened?" Fitzraven said, puzzled. "I didn't see the stroke that nailed him."

"It was very pretty," Retief said thoughtfully, lowering

the glasses. "Under the fifth rib and into the heart."

Now the big dark man and the tall broad fellow took their places. The bugles and whistles sounded, and the two launched a furious exchange, first one and then the other forcing his enemy back before losing ground in turn. The crowd roared its approval as the two stamped and thrust, parried and lunged.

"They can't keep up this pace forever," Fitzraven said. "They'll have to slow down."

"They're both good," Retief said. "And evenly matched."

Now the swarthy fellow leaped back, switched the foil to his left hand, then moved quickly in to the attack. Thrown off his pace, the other man faltered, let the blade nick him on the chest, again in the arm. Desperate, he back-pedalled, fighting defensively now. The dark man followed up his advantage, pressing savagely, and a moment later Retief saw a foot of bright steel projecting startlingly from the tall man's back. He took two steps, then folded, as the foil was wrenched from the dark man's hand.

Wave upon wave of sound rolled across the packed stands. Never had they seen such an exhibition as this! It was like the legendary battle

of the heroes of the Empire, the fighters who had carried the Lily banner half across the galaxy.

"I'm afraid that's all," Fitzraven said. "These two can elect either to share the victory of the Tourney now, or to contend for sole honors, and in the history of the Tournament on Northroyal, there have never been fewer than three to share the day."

"It looks as though this is going to be the first time, then," Retief said. "They're getting ready to square off."

Below on the field, a mass of officials surrounded the dark man and the fair one, while the crowd outdid itself. Then a bugle sounded in an elaborate salute.

"That's it," Fitzraven said excitedly. "Heroes' Salute. They're going to do it."

"You don't know how glad I am to hear that," Retief said.

"What will the weapon be?" the squire wondered aloud.

"My guess is, something less deadly than the foil," Retief replied.

Moments later the announcement came. The two champions of the day would settle the issue with bare hands. This, thought Retief, would be something to see.

The fanfares and whistles

rang out again, and the two men moved cautiously together. The dark man swung an open-handed blow, which smacked harmlessly against the other's shoulder. An instant later the blonde youth feinted a kick, instead drove a hard left to the dark man's chin, staggering him. He followed up, smashing two blows to the stomach, then another to the head. The dark man moved back, suddenly reached for the blonde man's wrist as he missed a jab, whirled, and attempted to throw his opponent. The blonde man slipped aside, and locked his right arm over the dark man's head, seizing his own right wrist with his left hand. The dark man twisted, fell heavily on the other man, reaching for a headlock of his own.

The two rolled in the dust, then broke apart and were on their feet again. The dark man moved in, swung an open-handed slap which popped loudly against the blonde man's face. It was a device, Retief saw, to enrage the man, dull the edge of his skill.

The blonde man refused to be rattled, however; he landed blows against the dark man's head, evaded another attempt to grapple. It was plain that he preferred to avoid the other's bear-like embrace.

He boxed carefully, giving ground, landing a blow as the opportunity offered. The dark man followed doggedly, seemingly unaffected by the pounding. Suddenly he leaped, took two smashing blows full in the face, and crashed against the blonde man, knocking him to the ground. There was a flying blur of flailing arms and legs as the two rolled across the turf, and as they came to rest, Retief saw that the dark man had gotten his break. Kneeling behind the other, he held him in a rigid stranglehold, his back and shoulder muscles bulging with the effort of holding his powerful adversary immobilized.

"It's all over," Fitzraven said tensely.

"Maybe not," Retief replied. "Not if he plays it right, and doesn't panic."

The blonde man strained at the arm locked at his throat, twisting it fruitlessly. Instinct drove him to tear at the throttling grip, throw off the smothering weight. But the dark man's grip was solid, his position unshakable. Then the blond stopped struggling abruptly and the two seemed as still as an image in stone. The crowd fell silent, fascinated.

"He's given up," Fitzraven said.

"No; watch," Retief said. "He's starting to use his head."

The blonde man's arms reached up now, his hands moving over the other's head, seeking a grip. The dark man pulled his head in, pressing against his victim's back, trying to elude his grip. Then the hands found a hold, and the blonde man bent suddenly forward, heaving with a tremendous surge. The dark man came up, flipped high, his grip slipping. The blond rose as the other went over his head, shifted his grip in midair, and as the dark man fell heavily in front of him, the snap of the spine could be heard loud in the stillness. The battle was over, and the blonde victor rose to his feet amid a roar of applause.

Retief turned to Fitzraven. "Time for us to be going, Fitz," he said. The squire jumped up. "As you command, sir; but the ceremony is quite interesting . . ."

"Never mind that; let's go." Retief moved off, Fitzraven following, puzzled.

Retief descended the steps inside the stands, turned and started down the corridor.

"This way, sir," Fitzraven called. "That leads to the arena."

"I know it," Retief said. "That's where I'm headed."

Fitzraven hurried up alongside. What was the old man going to do now? "Sir," he said, "no one may enter the arena until the tourney has been closed, except the gladiators and the officials. I know this to be an unbreakable law."

"That's right, Fitz," Retief said. "You'll have to stop at the grooms' enclosure."

"But you, sir," Fitzraven gasped . . .

"Everything's under control," Retief said. "I'm going to challenge the Champion."

In the Imperial box, the Emperor Rolan leaned forward, fixing his binoculars on a group of figures at the officials' gate. There seemed to be some sort of disturbance there. This was a piece of damned impudence, just as the moment had arrived for the Imperial presentation of the Honors of the Day. The Emperor turned to an aide.

"What the devil's going on down there?" he snapped.

The courtier murmured into a communicator, listened.

"A madman, Imperial Majesty," he said smoothly. "He wished to challenge the champion."

"A drunk, more likely,"

Rolan said sharply. "Let him be removed at once. And tell the Master of the Games to get on with the ceremony!"

The Emperor turned to the slim dark girl at his side.

"Have you found the Games entertaining, Monica?"

"Yes, sire," she replied unemotionally.

"Don't call me that, Monica," he said testily. "Between us there is no need of formalities."

"Yes, Uncle," the girl said.

"Damn it, that's worse," he said. "To you I am simply Rolan." He placed his hand firmly on her silken knee. "And now if they'll get on with this tedious ceremony, I should like to be on the way. I'm looking forward with great pleasure to showing you my estates at Snowdahl."

The Emperor drummed his fingers, stared down at the field, raised the glasses only to see the commotion again.

"Get that fool off the field," he shouted, dropping the glasses. "Am I to wait while they haggle with this idiot? It's insufferable . . ."

Courtiers scurried, while Rolan glared down from his seat.

Below, Retief faced a cluster of irate referees. One, who had attempted to haul Retief bodily backward, was slumped

on a bench, attended by two surgeons.

"I claim the right to challenge, under the Charter," Retief repeated. "Nobody here will be so foolish, I hope, as to attempt to deprive me of that right, now that I have reminded you of the justice of my demand."

From the control cage directly below the Emperor's high box, a tall seam-faced man in black breeches and jacket emerged, followed by two armed men. The officials darted ahead, stringing out between the two, calling out. Behind Retief, on the other side of the barrier, Fitzraven watched anxiously. The old man was full of surprises, and had a way of getting what he wanted; but even if he had the right to challenge the Champion of the Games, what purpose could he have in doing so? He was as strong as a bull, but no man his age could be a match for the youthful power of the blonde fighter. Fitzraven was worried; he was fond of this old warrior. He would hate to see him locked behind the steel walls of Fragonard Keep for thus disturbing the order of the Lily Tournament. He moved closer to the barrier, watching.

The tall man in black strode

through the chattering officials, stopped before Retief, motioned his two guards forward.

He made a dismissing motion toward Retief. "Take him off the field," he said brusquely. The guards stepped up, laid hands on Retief's arms. He let them get a grip, then suddenly stepped back and brought his arms together. The two men cracked heads, stumbled back. Retief looked at the black-clad man.

"If you are the Master of the Games," he said clearly, "you are well aware that a decorated Battle Officer has the right of challenge, under the Imperial Charter. I invoke that prerogative now, to enter the lists against the man who holds the field."

"Get out, you fool," the official hissed, white with fury. "The Emperor himself has commanded . . ."

"Not even the Emperor can override the Charter, which predates his authority by four hundred years," Retief said coldly. "Now do your duty."

"There'll be no more babble of duties and citing of technicalities while the Emperor waits," the official snapped. He turned to one of the two guards who hung back now, eyeing Retief. "You have a pistol; draw it. "If I give the

command, shoot him between the eyes."

Relief reached up and adjusted a tiny stud set in the stiff collar of his tunic. He tapped his finger lightly against the cloth. The sound boomed across the arena. A command microphone of the type authorized a Battle Commander was a very efficient device.

"I have claimed the right to challenge the champion," he said slowly. The words rolled out like thunder. "This right is guaranteed under the Charter to any Imperial Battle officer who wears the Silver Star."

The Master of the Games stared at him aghast. This was getting out of control. Where the devil had the old man gotten a microphone and a P. A. system? The crowd was roaring now like a gigantic surf. This was something new!

Far above in the Imperial box the tall gray-eyed man was rising, turning toward the exit. "The effrontery," he said in a voice choked with rage. "That I should sit awaiting the pleasure . . ."

The girl at his side hesitated, hearing the amplified voice booming across the arena.

"Wait, . . . Rolan," she said. "Something is happening . . ."

The man looked back. "A trifle late," he snapped.

"One of the contestants is disputing something," she said. "There was an announcement—something about an Imperial officer challenging the champion."

The Emperor Rolan turned to an aide hovering nearby.

"What is this nonsense?"

The courtier bowed. "It is merely a technicality, Majesty. A formality lingering on from earlier times."

"Be specific," the Emperor snapped.

The aide lost some of his aplomb. "Why, it means, ah, that an officer of the Imperial forces holding a battle commission and certain high decorations may enter the lists at any point, without other qualifying conditions. A provision never invoked under modern . . ."

The Emperor turned to the girl. "It appears that someone seeks to turn the entire performance into a farcical affair, at my expense," he said bitterly. "We shall see just how far . . ."

"I call on you, Rolan," Relief's voice boomed, "to enforce the Code."

"What impertinence is this?" Rolan growled. "Who is the fool at the microphone?"

The aide spoke into his communicator, listened.

"An old man from the crowd, sire. He wears the insignia of a Battle-Commander, and a number of decorations, including the Silver Star. According to the Archivist, he has the legal right to challenge."

"I won't have it," Rolan snapped. "A fine reflection on me that would be. Have them take the fellow away; he's doubtless crazed." He left the box, followed by his entourage.

"Rolan," the girl said, "wasn't that the way the Tourneys were, back in the days of the Empire?"

"THESE are the days of the Empire, Monica. And I am not interested in what used to be done. This is today. Am I to present the spectacle of a doddering old fool being hacked to bits, in my name? I don't want the timid to be shocked by butchery. It might have unfortunate results for my propaganda program. I'm currently emphasizing the glorious aspects of the coming war, not the sordid ones. There has already been too much bloodshed today; an inauspicious omen for my expansion plan."

On the field below, the Master of the Games stepped closer to Retief. He felt the

cold eyes of the Emperor himself boring into his back. This old devil could bring about his ruin . . .

"I know all about you," he snarled. "I've checked on you, since you forced your way into an official area; I interviewed two officers . . . you overawed them with glib talk and this threadbare finery you've decked yourself in. Now you attempt to ride rough-shod over me. Well, I'm not so easily thrust aside. If you resist arrest any further, I'll have you shot where you stand!"

Retief drew his sword.

"In the name of the Code you are sworn to serve," he said, his voice ringing across the arena, "I will defend my position." He reached up and flipped the stud at his throat to full pick-up.

"To the Pit with your infernal Code!" bellowed the Master, and blanched in horror as his words boomed sharp and clear across the field to the ears of a hundred thousand people. He stared around, then whirled back to Retief. "Fire," he screamed.

A pistol cracked, and the guard spun, dropped. Fitzraven held the tiny power gun leveled across the barrier at the other guard. "What next, sir?" he asked brightly.

The sound of the shot, amplified, smashed deafeningly across the arena, followed by a mob roar of excitement, bewilderment, shock. The group around Retief stood frozen, staring at the dead man. The Master of the Games made a croaking sound, eyes bulging. The remaining guard cast a glance at the pistol, then turned and ran.

There were calls from across the field; then a troop of brown-uniformed men emerged from an entry, trotted toward the group. The officer at their head carried a rapid fire shock gun in his hand. He waved his squad to a halt as he reached the fringe of the group. He stared at Retief's drab uniform, glanced at the corpse. Retief saw that the officer was young, determined looking, wearing the simple insignia of a Battle Ensign.

The Master of the Games found his voice. "Arrest this villain!" he screeched, pointing at Retief. Shoot the murderer!"

The ensign drew himself to attention, saluted crisply.

"Your orders, sir," he said.

"I've told you!" the Master howled. "Seize this malefactor!"

The ensign turned to the

black-clad official. "Silence, sir, or I shall be forced to remove you," he said sharply. He looked at Retief. "I await the Commander's orders."

Retief smiled, returned the young officer's salute with a wave of his sword, then sheathed it. "I'm glad to see a little sense displayed here, at last, Battle-Ensign," he said. "I was beginning to fear I'd fallen among Concordiatists."

The outraged Master began an harangue which was abruptly silenced by two riot police. He was led away, protesting. The other officials disappeared like a morning mist, carrying the dead guard.

"I've issued my challenge, Ensign," Retief said. "I wish it to be conveyed to the champion-apparent at once." He smiled. "And I'd like you to keep your men around to see that nothing interferes with the orderly progress of the Tourney in accordance with the Charter in its original form."

The ensign's eyes sparkled. Now here was a battle-officer who sounded like a fighting man; not a windbag like the commandant of the Household Regiment from whom the ensign took his orders. He didn't know where the old man came from, but any battle-officer outranked any civilian or

flabby barracks-soldier, and this was a Battle Commander, a general officer, and of the Dragon Corps!

Minutes later, a chastened Master of the Games announced that a challenge had been issued. It was the privilege of the champion to accept, or to refuse the challenge if he wished. In the latter event, the challenge would automatically be met the following year.

"I don't know what your boys said to the man," Retief remarked, as he walked out to the combat circle, the ensign at his left side and slightly to the rear, "but they seem to have him educated quickly."

"They can be very persuasive, sir," the young officer replied.

They reached the circle, stood waiting. Now, thought Retief, I've got myself in the position I've been working toward. The question now is whether I'm still man enough to put it over.

He looked up at the massed stands, listening to the mighty roar of the crowd. There would be no easy out for him now. Of course, the new champion might refuse to fight; he had every right to do so, feeling he had earned his year's rest and enjoyment of his winnings. But that would be a

defeat for Retief as final as death on the dusty ground of the arena. He had come this far by bluff, threat, and surprise. He would never come this close again.

It was luck that he had clashed with this young man outside the gate, challenged him to enter the lists. That might give the challenge the personal quality that would elicit an angry acceptance.

The champion was walking toward Retief now, surrounded by referees. He stared at the old man, eyes narrowed. Retief returned the look calmly.

"Is this dodderer the challenger?" the blonde youth asked scathingly. "It seems to me I have met his large mouth before?"

"Never mind my mouth, merchant," Retief said loudly. "It is not talk I offer you, but the bite of steel."

The yellow-haired man reddened, then laughed shortly. "Small glory I'd win out of skewering you, old gray-beard."

"You'd get even less out of showing your heels," Retief said.

"You will not provoke me into satisfying your perverted ambition to die here," the other retorted.

"It's interesting to note," Retief said, "how a peasant peddler wags his tongue to avoid a fight. Such rabble should not be permitted on honorable ground." He studied the other's face to judge how this line of taunting was going on. It was distasteful to have to embarrass the young fellow; he seemed a decent sort. But he had to enrage him to the point that he would discard his wisdom and throw his new-won prize on the table for yet another cast of the dice. And his sore point seemed to be mention of commerce.

"Back to your cabbages, then, fellow," Retief said harshly, "before I whip you there with the flat of my sword."

The young fellow looked at him, studying him. His face was grim. "All right," he said quietly. "I'll meet you in the circle."

Another point gained, Retief thought, as he moved to his position at the edge of the circle. Now, if I can get him to agree to fight on horseback . . .

He turned to a referee. "I wish to suggest that this contest be conducted on horseback—if the peddler owns a horse and is not afraid."

The point was discussed be-

tween the referee and the champion's attendants, with many glances at Retief, and much waving of arms. The official returned. "The champion agrees to meet you by day or by night, in heat or cold, on foot or on horseback."

"Good," said Retief. "Tell my groom to bring out my mount."

It was no idle impulse which prompted this move. Retief had no illusions as to what it would take to win a victory over the champion. He knew that his legs, while good enough for most of the business of daily life, were his weakest point. They were no longer the nimble tireless limbs that had once carried him up to meet the outlaw Mal de Di alone in Bifrost Pass. Nine hours later he had brought the bandit's two hundred and ten pound body down into the village on his back, his own arm broken. He had been a mere boy then, younger than this man he was now to meet. He had taken up Mal de Di's standing challenge to any unarmed man who would come alone to the high pass, to prove that he was not too young to play a man's part. Perhaps now he was trying to prove he was not too old . . .

An official approached lead-

ing Danger-by-Night. It took an expert to appreciate the true worth of the great gaunt animal, Retief knew. To the uninitiated eye, he presented a sorry appearance, but Retief would rather have had this mount with the imperial brand on his side, than a pad-dock full of show horses.

A fat white charger was led out to the blonde champion. It looked like a strong animal, Retief thought, but slow. His chances were looking better, things were going well.

A ringing blast of massed trumpets cut through the clamor of the crowd. Retief mounted, watching his opponent. A referee came to his side, handed up a heavy club, studded with long projecting spikes. "Your weapon, sir," he said.

Retief took the thing. It was massive, clumsy; he had never before handled such a weapon. He knew no subtleties of technique with this primitive bludgeon. The blonde youth had surprised him, he admitted to himself, smiling slightly. As the challenged party, he had the choice of weapons, of course. He had picked an unusual one.

Retief glanced across at Fitzraven, standing behind the inner barrier, jaw set, a

grim expression on his face. That boy, thought Retief, doesn't have much confidence in my old bones holding out.

The whistle blew. Retief moved toward the other man at a trot, the club level at his side. He had decided to handle it like a shortsword, so long as that seemed practical. He would have to learn by experience.

The white horse cantered past him swerving, and the blond fellow whirled his club at Retief's head. Automatically, Retief raised his club, fended off the blow, cut at the other's back, missed. This thing is too short, Retief thought, whirling his horse. I've got to get in closer. He charged at the champion as the white horse was still in mid-turn, slammed a heavy blow against his upraised club, rocking the boy; then he was past, turning again. He caught the white horse shorter this time, barely into his turn, and aimed a swing at the man who first twisted to face him, then spurred, leaped away. Retief pursued him, yelping loudly. Get him rattled, he thought. Get him good and mad!

The champion veered suddenly, veered again, then reared his horse high, whirling, to

bring both forefeet down in a chopping attack. Retief reined in, and Danger-by-Night side-stepped disdainfully, as the heavy horse crashed down facing him.

That was a pretty maneuver, Retief thought; but slow, too slow.

His club swung in an overhand cut; the white horse tossed his head suddenly, and the club smashed down across the animal's skull. With a shuddering exhalation, the beast collapsed, and the blonde man sprang clear.

Retief reined back, dismayed. He hadn't wanted to kill the animal. He had the right, now, to ride the man down from the safety of the saddle. When gladiators met in mortal combat, there were no rules except those a man made for himself. If he dismounted, met his opponent on equal terms, the advantage his horse had given him would be lost. He looked at the man standing now, facing him, waiting, blood on his face from the fall. He thought of the job he had set himself, the plan that hinged on his victory here. He reminded himself that he was old, too old to meet youth on equal terms; but even as he did so, he was reining the lean battle stallion back, swinging

down from the saddle. There were some things a man had to do, whether logic was served or not. He couldn't club the man down like a mad dog from the saddle.

There was a strange expression on the champion's face. He sketched a salute with the club he held. "All honor to you, old man," he said. "Now I will kill you." He moved in confidently.

Retief stood his ground, raising his club to deflect a blow, shifting an instant ahead of the pattern of the blonde man's assault. There was a hot exchange as the younger man pressed him, took a glancing blow on the temple, stepped back breathing heavily. This wasn't going as he had planned. The old man stood like a wall of stone, not giving an inch; and when their weapons met, it was like flailing at a granite boulder. The young fellow's shoulder ached from the shock. He moved sideways, circling cautiously.

Retief moved to face him. It was risky business, standing up to the attack, but his legs were not up to any fancy footwork. He had no desire to show his opponent how stiff his movements were, or to tire himself with skipping about. His arms were still as good as

any man's, or better. They would have to carry the battle.

The blonde jumped in, swung a vicious cut; Retief leaned back, hit out in a one-handed blow, felt the club smack solidly against the other's jaw. He moved now, followed up, landed again on the shoulder. The younger man backed, shaking his head. Retief stopped, waited. It was too bad he couldn't follow up his advantage, but he couldn't chase the fellow all over the arena. He had to save his energy for an emergency. He lowered his club, leaned on it. The crowd noises waxed and waned, unnoticed. The sun beat down in unshielded whiteness, and fitful wind moved dust across the field.

"Come back, peddler," he called. "I want you to sample more of my wares." If he could keep the man angry, he would be careless; and Retief needed the advantage.

The yellow-haired man charged suddenly, whirling the club. Retief raised his, felt the shock of the other's weapon against his. He whirled as the blonde darted around him, shifted the club to his left hand in time to ward off a wild swing. Then the fingers of his left hand exploded in fiery agony, and the club flew

from his grasp. His head whirled, vision darkening, at the pain from his smashed fingers. He tottered, kept his feet, managed to blink away the faintness, to stare at this hand. Two fingers were missing, pulped, unrecognizable. He had lost his weapon; he was helpless now before the assault of the other.

His head hummed harshly, and his breath came like hot sand across an open wound. He could feel a tremor start and stop in his leg, and his whole left arm felt as though it had been stripped of flesh in a shredding machine. He had not thought it would be as bad as this. His ego, he realized, hadn't aged gracefully.

Now is the hour, old man, he thought. There's no help for you to call on, no easy way out. You'll have to look within yourself for some hidden reserve of strength and endurance and will; and you must think well now, wisely, with a keen eye and a quick hand, or lose your venture. With a moment stiffened by the rack-ing pain-shock, he drew his ceremonial dagger, a jewel-encrusted blade ten inches long. At the least he would die with a weapon in his hand and his face to the enemy.

The blonde youth moved closer, tossed the club aside.

"Shall a peddler be less capable of the *béau geste* than the arrogant knight?" He laughed, drawing a knife from his belt. "Is your head clear, old man?" he asked. "Are you ready?"

"A gesture . . . you can . . . ill afford," Retief managed. Even breathing hurt. His nerves were shrieking their message of shock at the crushing of living flesh and bone. His forehead was pale, wet with cold sweat.

The young fellow closed, struck out, and Retief evaded the point by an inch, stepped back. His body couldn't stand pain as once it had, he was realizing. He had grown soft, sensitive. For too many years he had been a Diplomat, an operator by manipulation, by subtlety and finesse. Now, when it was man to man, brute strength against brute strength, he was failing.

But he had known when he started that strength was not enough, not without agility; it was subtlety he should be relying on now, his skill at trickery, his devious wit.

Retief caught a glimpse of staring faces at the edge of the field, heard for a moment the mob roar, and then he was again wholly concentrated on the business at hand.

He breathed deeply, strug-

gling for clear-headedness. He had to inveigle the boy into a contest in which he stood a chance. If he could put him on his mettle, make him give up his advantage of tireless energy, quickness . . .

"Are you an honest peddler, or a dancing master," Retief managed to growl. "Stand and meet me face to face."

The blonde man said nothing, feinting rapidly, then striking out. Retief was ready, nicked the other's wrist.

"Gutter fighting is one thing," Retief said. "But you are afraid to face the old man's steel, right arm against right arm." If he went for that, Retief thought, he was even younger than he looked.

"I have heard of the practice," the blonde man said, striking at Retief, moving aside from a return cut. "It was devised for old men who did not wish to be made ridiculous by more agile men. I understand that you think you can hoodwink me, but I can beat you at your own game . . ."

"My point awaits your pleasure," Retief said.

The younger man moved closer, knife held before him. Just a little closer, Retief thought. Just a little closer.

The blonde man's eyes were

on Retief's. Without warning, Retief dropped his knife and in a lightning motion caught the other's wrist.

"Now struggle, little fish," he said. "I have you fast."

The two men stood chest to chest, staring into each other's eyes. Retief's breath came hard, his heart pounded almost painfully. His left arm was a great pulsating weight of pain. Sweat ran down his dusty face into his eyes. But his grip was locked solidly. The blonde youth strained in vain.

With a twist of his wrist Retief turned the blade, then forced the youth's arm up. The fellow struggled to prevent it, throwing all his weight into his effort, fruitlessly. Retief smiled.

"I won't kill you," he said, "but I will have to break your arm. That way you cannot be expected to continue the fight."

"I want no favors from you, old man," the youth panted.

"You won't consider this a favor until the bones knit," Retief said. "Consider this a fair return for my hand."

He pushed the arm up, then suddenly turned it back, levered the upper arm over his forearm, and yanked the tortured member down behind the blonde man's back. The

bones snapped audibly, and the white-faced youth gasped, staggered as Retief released him.

There were minutes of confusion as referees rushed in, announcements rang out, medics hovered, and the crowd roared its satisfaction, after the fickle nature of crowds. They were satisfied.

An official pushed through to Retief. He wore the vivid colors of the Review regiment. Retief reached up and set the control on the command mike.

"I have the honor to advise you, sir, that you have won the field, and the honors of the day." He paused, startled at the booming echoes, then went on. The bystanders watched curiously, as Retief tried to hold his concentration on the man, to stand easily, while blackness threatened to move in over him. The pain from the crushed hand swelled and focused, then faded, came again. The great dry lungfulls of air he drew in failed to dispel the sensation of suffocation. He struggled to understand the words that seemed to echo from a great distance.

"And now in the name of the Emperor, for crimes against the peace and order of the Empire, I place you under

arrest for trial before the High Court at Fragonard."

Retief drew a deep breath, gathered his thoughts to speak.

"Nothing," he said, "could possibly please me more."

The room was vast and ornate, and packed with dignitaries, high officials, peers of the Lily. Here in the great chamber known as the Blue Vault, the High Court sat in silent ranks, waiting.

The charges had been read, the evidence presented. The prisoner, impersonating a peer of the Lily and an officer of an ancient and honored Corps, had flaunted the law of Northroyal and the authority of the Emperor, capping his audacity with murder, done by the hand of his servant sworn. Had the prisoner anything to say?

Retief, alone in the prisoner's box in the center of the room, his arm heavily bandaged and deadened with dope, faced the court. This would be the moment when all his preparations would be put to the ultimate test. He had laid long plans toward this hour. The archives of the Corps were beyond comparison in the galaxy, and he had spent weeks there, absorbing every detail of the fact that had been re-

corded on the world of Northroyal, and on the Old Empire which had preceded it. And to the lore of the archives, he had added facts known to himself, data from his own wide experience. But would those tenuous threads of tradition, hearsay, rumor, and archaic record hold true now? That was the gamble on which his mission was staked. The rabbits had better be in the hat.

He looked at the dignitaries arrayed before him. It had been a devious route, but so far he had succeeded; he had before him the highest officials of the world, the High Justices, the Imperial Archivist, the official keepers of the Charter and the Code, and of the protocols and rituals of the tradition on which this society was based. He had risked everything on his assault on the sacred stasis of the Tournament, but how else could he have gained the ears of this select audience, with all Northroyal tuned in to hear the end of the drama that a hundred thousand had watched build to its shattering climax?

Now it was his turn to speak. It had better be good.

"Peers of the realm," Retief said, speaking clearly and slowly, "the basis of the charges laid against me is the

assumption that I have falsified my identity. Throughout, I have done no more than exercise the traditional rights of a general officer and of a Lilyn peer, and, as befits a Cavalier, I have resisted all attempts to deprive me of those honored prerogatives. While it is regrettable that the low echelon of officials appears to be ignorant of the status of a Lilyn Battle Commander, it is my confident assumption that here, before the ranking nobles of the Northroyalan peerage, the justice of my position will be recognized."

As Retief paused, a dour graybeard spoke up from the Justices' bench.

"Your claims are incoherent to this court. You are known to none of us; and if by chance you claim descent from some renegade who deserted his fellow cavaliers at the time of the Exile, you will find scant honor among honest men here. From this, it is obvious that you delude yourself in imagining that you can foist your masquerade on this court successfully."

"I am not native to Northroyal," Retief said, "nor do I claim to be. Nor am I a descendant of renegades. Are you gentlemen not overlooking the fact that there was one ship which did not accom-

pany the cavaliers into exile, but escaped Concordiat surveillance and retired to rally further opposition to the invasion?"

There was a flurry of muttered comment, putting together of heads, and shuffling of papers. The High Justice spoke.

"This would appear to be a reference to the vessel bearing the person of the Emperor Roquelle and his personal suite..."

"That is correct," Retief said.

"You stray farther than ever from the credible," a justice snapped. "The entire royal household accompanied the Emperor Rolan on the happy occasion of his rejoining his subjects here at Northroyal a year ago."

"About that event, I will have more to say later," Retief said coolly. "For the present, suffice it to say that I am a legitimate descendant..."

"It does indeed NOT suffice to say!" barked the High Justice. "Do you intend to instruct this court as to what evidence will be acceptable?"

"A figure of speech, Milord," Retief said. "I am quite able to prove my statement."

"Very well," said the High Justice. "Let us see your

proof, though I confess I cannot conceive of a satisfactory one."

Retief reached down, un-snapped the flat despatch case at his belt, drew out a document.

"This is my proof of my bona fides," he said. "I present it in evidence that I have committed no fraud. I am sure that you will recognize an authentic commission-in-patent of the Emperor Roquelle. Please note that the seals are unbroken." He passed the paper over.

A page took the heavy paper, looped with faded red ribbon and plastered with saucer-sized seals, trotted over to the Justices' bench and handed it up to the High Justice. He took it, gazed at it, turning it over, then broke the crumbling seals. The nearby Justices leaned over to see this strange exhibit. It was a heavily embossed document of the Old Empire type, setting forth genealogy and honors, and signed in sprawling letters with the name of an emperor two centuries dead, sealed with his tarnished golden seal. The Justices stared in amazement. The document was worth a fortune.

"I ask that the lowermost paragraph be read aloud," Re-

tief said. "The amendment of thirty years ago."

The High Justice hesitated, then waved a page to him, handed down the document. "Read the lowermost paragraph aloud," he said.

The page read in a clear, well-trained voice.

"KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS THAT WHEREAS: THIS OUR LOYAL SUBJECT AND PEER OF THE IMPERIAL LILY JAME JARL FREELORD OF THE RETIEF; OFFICER IMPERIAL OF THE GUARD; OFFICER OF BATTLE; HEREDITARY LEGIONNAIRE OF HONOR; CAVALIER OF THE LILY; DEFENDER OF SALIENT WEST; BY IMPERIAL GRACE OFFICER OF THE SILVER STAR; HAS BY HIS GALLANTRY FIDELITY AND SKILL BROUGHT HONOR TO THE IMPERIAL LILY: AND WHEREAS WE PLACE SPECIAL CONFIDENCE AND ESTEEM IN THIS SUBJECT AND PEER: WE DO THEREFORE APPOINT AND COMMAND THAT HE SHALL FORTHWITH ASSUME AND HENCEFORTH BEAR THE HONORABLE RANK OF BATTLE COMMANDER: AND THAT HE SHALL BEAR THE OBLIGATIONS AND ENJOY THE PRIVILEGES APPERTAINING THEREUNTO: AS SHALL HIS HEIRS FOREVER."

There was a silence in the chamber as the page finish-

ed reading. All eyes turned to Retief, who stood in the box, strange expression on his face.

The page handed the paper back up to the High Justice, who resumed his perusal.

"I ask that my retinal patterns now be examined, and matched to those coded on the amendment," Retief said. The High Justice beckoned to a Messenger, and the court waited a restless five minutes until the arrival of an expert who quickly made the necessary check. He went to the Justice's bench, handed up a report form, and left the court room. The magistrate glanced at the form, turned again to the document. Below Roquelle's seal were a number of amendments, each in turn signed and sealed. The justices spelled out the unfamiliar names.

"Where did you get this?" the High Justice demanded uncertainly.

"It has been the property of my family for nine generations," Retief replied.

Heads nodded over the document, gray beards wagged.

"How is it," asked a Justice, "that you offer in evidence a document bearing amendments validated by signatures and seals completely unknown to us? In order to impress this court, such a warrant might

well bear the names of actual former emperors, rather than of fictitious ones. I note the lowermost amendment, purporting to be a certification of high military rank dated only thirty years ago is signed 'Ronare.' "

"I was at that time attached to the Imperial Suite-in-Exile," Retief said. "I commanded the forces of the Emperor Ronare."

The High Justice and a number of other members of the court snorted openly.

"This impertinence will not further your case," the old magistrate said sharply. "Ronare, indeed. You cite a non-existent authority. At the alleged time of issue of this warrant, the father of our present monarch held the Imperial fief at Trallend."

"At the time of the issue of this document," Retief said in ringing tones, "the father of your present ruler held the bridle when the Emperor mounted!"

An uproar broke out from all sides. The Master-at-arms pounded in vain for silence. At length a measure of order was restored by a gangly official who rose and shouted for the floor. The roar died down, and the stringy fellow, clad in russet velvet with the gold

chain of the Master of the Seal about his neck, called out, "let the court find the traitor guilty summarily and put an end to this insupportable insolence . . ."

"Northroyal has been the victim of fraud," Retief said loudly in the comparative lull. "But not on my part. The man Rolan is an imposter."

A tremendous pounding of gavels and staffs eventually brought the outraged dignitaries to grim silence. The Presiding Justice peered down at Retief with doom in his lensed eyes. "Your knowledge of the Lilyan tongue and of the forms of court practice as well as the identity of your retinal patterns with those of the warrant tend to substantiate your origin in the Empire. Accordingly, this court is now disposed to recognize in you that basest of offenders, a renegade of the peerage." He raised his voice. "Let it be recorded that one Jame Jarl, a freelord of the Imperial Lily and officer Imperial of the Guard has by his own words disavowed his oath and his lineage." The fiery old man glared around at his fellow jurists. "Now let the dog of a broken officer be sentenced!"

"I have proof of what I say," Retief called out. "Noth-

ing has been proven against me. I have acted by the Code, and by the Code I demand my hearing!"

"You have spurned the Code," said a fat dignitary.

"I have told you that a usurper sits on the Lily throne," Retief said. "If I can't prove it, execute me."

There was an icy silence.

"Very well," said the High Justice. "Present your proof."

"When the man, Rolan, appeared," Retief said, "he presented the Imperial seal and ring, the ceremonial robe, the major portion of the crown jewels, and the Imperial Genealogy."

"That is correct."

"Was it noted, by any chance, that the seal was without its chain, that the robe was stained, that the most important of the jewels, the ancient Napoleon Emerald, was missing; that the ring bore deep scratches, and that the lock on the book had been forced?"

A murmur grew along the high benches of the court. Intent eyes glared down at Retief.

"And was it not considered strange that the Imperial signet was not presented by this would-be Emperor, when that signet alone constitutes the true symbol of the Empire?"

Retief's voice had risen to a thunderous loudness.

The High Justice stared now with a different emotion in his eyes.

"What do you know of these matters?" he demanded, but without assurance.

Retief reached into a tiny leather bag at his side, drew out something which he held out for inspection.

"This is a broken chain," he said. "It was cut when the seal was stolen from its place in Suite-in-Exile." He placed the heavy links on the narrow wainscote before him. "This," he said, "is the Napoleon Emerald, once worn by the legendary Bonaparte in a ring. It is unique in the galaxy, and easily proved genuine." There was utter stillness now. Retief placed a small key beside the chain and the gem. "This key will open the forced lock of the Imperial Geneological Record."

Retief brought out an ornately wrought small silver casket and held it in view.

"The stains on the robe are the blood of the Emperor Ronare, shed by the knife of a murderer. The ring is scratched by the same knife, used to sever the finger in order to remove the ring." A murmur of horrified comment ran round the room now. Retief waited,

letting all eyes focus on the silver box in his hand. It contained a really superb copy of the Imperial Signet; like the chain, the key and the emerald, the best that the science of the Corps could produce, accurate even in its internal molecular structure. It had to be, if it were to have a chance of acceptance. It would be put to the test without delay, matched to an electronic matrix with which it would, if acceptable, resonate perfectly. The copy had been assembled on the basis of some excellent graphic records; the original signet, as Retief knew, had been lost irretrievably in a catastrophic palace fire, a century and a half ago.

He opened the box, showed the magnificent wine-red crystal set in platinum. Now was the moment. "This is the talisman which alone would prove the falseness of the imposter Rolan," Retief said. "I call upon the honorable High Court to match it to the matrix; and while that is being done, I ask that the honorable Justices study carefully the geneology included in the Imperial patent which I have presented to the court."

A messenger was dispatched to bring in the matrix while the Justices adjusted the focus of their corrective

lenses and clustered over the document. The chamber buzzed with tense excitement. This was a fantastic development indeed!

The High Justice looked up as the massive matrix device was wheeled into the room. He stared at Retief. "This geneology—" he began.

A Justice plucked at his sleeve, indicated the machine, whispering something. The High Justice nodded.

Retief handed the silver box down carefully to a page, watched as the chamber of the machine was opened, the great crystal placed in position. He held his breath as technicians twiddled controls, studied dials, then closed a switch. There was a sonorous musical tone from the machine.

The technician looked up. "The crystal," he said, "does match the matrix."

Amid a burst of exclamations which died as he faced the High Justice, Retief spoke.

"My lords, peers of the Imperial Lily," he said in a ringing voice, "know by this signet that we, Retief, by the grace of God Emperor, do now claim our rightful throne."

And just as quickly as the exclamations had died, they rose once more—a mixture of surprise and awe.

"A brilliant piece of work, Mr. Minister, and congratulations on your promotion," the Ambassador-at-large said warmly. "You've shown what individualism and the unorthodox approach can accomplish where the academic viewpoint would consider the situation hopeless."

"Thank you, Mr. Ambassador," Retief replied, smiling. "I was surprised myself when it was all over, that my gamble paid off. Frankly, I hope I won't ever be in a position again to be quite so inventive."

"I don't mind telling you now," the Ambassador said, "that when I saw Magnan's report of your solo assignment to the case, I seriously attempted to recall you, but it was too late. It was a nasty piece of business sending a single agent in on a job with the wide implications of this one. Mr. Magnan had been under a strain, I'm afraid. He is having a long rest now . . ."

Retief understood perfectly. His former chief had gotten the axe, and he himself had emerged clothed in virtue. That was the one compensation of desperate ventures; if you won, they paid well. In his new rank, he had a long

tenure ahead. He hoped the next job would be something complex and far removed from Northroyal. He thought back over the crowded weeks of his brief reign there as Emperor. It had been a stormy scene when the bitterly resisting Rolan had been brought to face the High Court. The man had been hanged an hour before sunrise on the following day, still protesting his authenticity. That, at least, was a lie. Retief was grateful that he had proof that Rolan was a fraud, because he would have sent him to the gallows on false evidence even had he been the true heir.

His first act after his formal enthronement had been the abolition in perpetuity of the rite of the tourney, and the formal cancellation of all genealogical requirements for appointments public or private. He had ordered the release and promotion of the Battle Ensign who had ignored Rolan's arrest order and had been himself imprisoned for his pains. Fitzraven he had seen appointed to the Imperial War College—his future assured.

Retief smiled as he remembered the embarrassment of the young fellow who had been his fellow-finalist in the tourney. He had offered him

satisfaction on the field of honor as soon as his arm healed, and had been asked in return for forgetfulness of poor judgment. He had made him a Captain of the Guard and a peer of the realm. He had the spirit for it.

There had been much more to do, and Retief's days had been crowded with the fantastically complex details of disengaging a social structure from the crippling reactionary restraints of ossified custom and hallowed tradition. In the end, he had produced a fresh and workable new constitution for the kingdom which he hoped would set the world on an enlightened and dynamic path to a productive future.

The memory of Princess Monica lingered pleasantly; a true princess of the Lily, in the old tradition. Retief had abdicated in her favor; her genealogy had been studded with enough Imperial forebears to satisfy the crustiest of the Old Guard peerage; of course, it could not compare with the handsome document he had displayed showing his own descent in the direct line through seven—or was it eight—generations of Emperors-in-exile from the lost monarch of the beleaguered Lily

Empire, but it was enough to justify his choice. Rolan's abortive usurpation had at least had the effect of making the Northroyalans appreciate an enlightened ruler.

At the last, it had not been easy to turn away forever from the seat of Empire which he so easily sat. It had not been lightly that he had said good-bye to the lovely Monica, who had reminded him of another dark beauty of long ago.

A few weeks in a modern hospital had remedied the harsher after-effects of his short career as a gladiator, and he was ready now for the next episode that fate and the Corps might have in store. But he would not soon forget Northroyal . . .

" . . . magnificent ingenuity," someone was saying. "You must have assimilated your indoctrination on the background unusually thoroughly to have been able to prepare in advance just those artifacts and documents

which would prove most essential. And the technical skill in the production itself. Remarkable. To think that you were able to hoodwink the high priests of the cult in the very sanctum sanctorum."

"Merely the result of careful research," Retief said modestly. "I found all I needed on late developments, buried in our files. The making of the Signet was quite a piece of work; but credit for that goes to our own technicians."

"I was even more impressed by that document," a young counsellor said. "What a knowledge of their psychology, and of technical detail that required."

Retief smiled faintly. The others had all gone into the hall now, amid a babble of conversation. It was time to be going. He glanced at the eager junior agent.

"No," he said, "I can't claim much credit there. I've had that document for many years; it, at least, was perfectly genuine."

THE END



THE WORLD- TIMER

By ROBERT BLOCH

ILLUSTRATOR BERNKLAU

Definition of a time capsule: you put things into it for posterity to find.
Definition of a Time Capsule: you put it in you, and find yourself. Dr.
Morton Placebo was not at all sure he liked the idea.

HE MAY or may not have been human.

It was hard to tell, because in a psychiatrist's office, you get all kinds.

But he *looked* human—that is to say he had two arms, two legs, one head, and a slightly



worried expression—and there was no reason for the receptionist to turn him away.

Particularly since he was here to give free samples.

"I'm from the Ace Manufacturing Company," he told the girl. "An old established firm. You've heard of us?"

The receptionist, who dealt with an average of ten salesmen a day, nodded politely and proceeded to file her nails.

"As the name indicates, we used to be a specialty house," the salesman continued. "Manufactured all the aces used in decks of playing cards. But lately we've branched out into pharmaceuticals."

"How nice for you," said the receptionist, wondering what he was talking about, but not very much.

"Not ordinary products, of course. We have the feeling that most pharmaceuticals are a drug on the market. So we've come up with something different. As our literature indicates, it's more along the lines of the lysergic acid derivatives. In addition to the usual tranquilizing effect, it alters the time-sense, both subjectively and objectively. Mind you, I said 'objectively'. I'm sure your employer will be interested in this aspect, which is to say the least, highly revolutionary—"

"I doubt it. He's always voted Republican."

"But if I could just discuss the matter with him for a few moments—"

The girl shrugged and cocked her head towards the inner sanctum of Morton Placebo, M.D.

"Nobody rides that couch without a ticket," she told him. "The standard fee is \$50 an hour, first-class, or \$30, tourist. That's with three on the couch at the same time. He says it's group-therapy, and I say it's damned uncomfortable."

"But I'm not a patient," the stranger persisted. "I merely want to discuss my pharmaceuticals."

"You can't discuss your hemorrhoids without paying the fee," the receptionist drawled. "Doctor isn't in business for your health, you know."

The salesman sighed. "I'll just have to leave a few samples and some literature, I guess. Maybe he'll look it over and see me when I call back later. I'm sure he's going to be interested, because these little preparations will alter the entire concept and structure of psychotherapy."

"Then he won't be," the girl decided. "Dr. Placebo likes psychiatry just the way it is right now. Which is to say, at \$50 an hour."

"But he will take the free samples?" the salesman persisted.

"Of course. He'll take anything that doesn't cost money. In fact, he told me it was the free-fantasy which attracted him to the profession in the first place."

She reached out her hand and the representative of the Ace Manufacturing Company placed a little packet of three tablets on her palm.

"The literature is inside," he said. "Please ask the Doctor to study it carefully before he experiments with the dosage. I'll stop by again next week."

"Don't you want to leave your card?" asked the girl, politely.

"Of course. Here you are."

He handed it to her, turned on his heel, and made his exit.

The receptionist studied the card curiously.

It was the Ace of Spades.

Normally, Dr. Morton Placebo wouldn't have paid much attention to a salesman's sample; largely because the very idea of paying was anathema to him.

But, as psychiatrists are so fond of saying—and, quite frequently, demonstrating—the norm is an abstraction.

And Dr. Placebo was always interested in anything which came to him without charge. Perhaps his receptionist hadn't been far wrong when she'd analyzed his reasons for entering a psychiatric career. All psychotherapists have their quirks.

According to his eminent disciple and official biographer, Ernest Jones, the great Sigmund Freud believed in occultism, telepathy, and the magic of numbers. The esteemed Otto Rank developed a manic-depressive psychosis; Wilhelm Reich's rationality was impugned on occasion; Sandor Ferenczi suffered from unbalance due to organic brain-damage.

Compared to these gentlemen, Dr. Placebo's problem was a minor one; he was a frustrated experimenter. Both his frustration and his stinginess had their origin in his childhood, within the confines of the familial constellation.

In plain English, his father was stingier than he was, and when the young Morton Placebo evinced an interest in laboratory experimentation, the old man refused to put up the money for a chemistry set. Once, during his high school years, the young man managed to acquire two guinea-pigs, which promptly disappeared. He was unable to solve the mystery—any more than he could solve the fact that his father, who always carried peanut-butter sandwiches in his lunch-pail, went to work during the following week with meat sandwiches.

But now, at fifty, Morton Placebo, M.D., was fulfilled. He had his own laboratory at last,

in the form of his psychiatric practice, and no end of wonderful guinea-pigs. Best of all, the guinea-pigs paid large sums of money for the privilege of lending themselves to his experiments. Outside of his receptionist's salary, and the \$25 he spent having the couch resprung after a fat woman patient had successfully re-enacted a birth-fantasy, Dr. Placebo had no overhead at all. With the steady stream of salesmen and their free samples, there was no end to the types of experimentation he could indulge in.

He'd used pills which produced euphoria, pills which produced depression, pills which caused a simulation of schizophrenia, pills which had remarkable side-effects, pills which tranquilized, pills which stimulated; pills which resulted in such fascinating manifestations as satyriasis, virilence and the sudden eruption of motor reflexes in the *abductor minimi digit*. He kept copious notes on the reactions afforded by LSC, peyotl extracts, cantharidin, yohimbine and reserpine derivatives. Whenever he found himself with a patient on his hands (or couch) who did not respond to orthodox (or reformed) therapy, Dr. Placebo—purely in the interest of science, of course—reached into his drawer and hauled out a handful of free pills.

Thus it was that he was grateful when he received the samples from the Ace Manufacturing Company.

"The literature's on the inside," his girl told him. He nodded thoughtfully and stared at the glassine packet with its three yellow pills.

"*Time Capsules*" he read, aloud.

"Alters the time sense, both subjectively and objectively," the receptionist said, parroting what she remembered from the salesman's pitch.

"Subjectively," snapped Dr. Placebo. "Can't alter it objectively. Time is money, you know."

"But he said—"

"Never mind, I'll read the literature." Dr. Placebo dismissed her and thoughtfully opened the packet. A small wadded-up piece of paper fluttered out onto the desk. He picked it up, unfolded it, and stared at the message.

"Nstrctns

*Nclsd smpls fr prfssnl s
nly. ch s cpbl f prdng tmprl
dsctn prmntly nd trnsltng
sr nt nthr cntnm r tm vctr."*

There was more to it, much more, but Dr. Placebo didn't bother attempting to translate. Apparently this literature was written in the same foreign tongue used by general medical

practitioners when they scrawl their prescriptions. He'd better wait and get an explanation from his friendly neighborhood drug-store.

He gazed at the samples once again. *Time Capsules*. Catchy name for a pharmaceutical product. But why didn't the Ace Manufacturing Company print its literature in English? He scanned the last line of the literature. "*Dnt gt yr vwls n n prr.*"

Made no sense. No sense at all.

But then, neither did most of his patients. So perhaps the pills would do some good. He'd have to wait for a likely subject.

The likely subject arrived at 3 p.m. Her name was Cookie Jarr, which was probably a polite euphemism for "sexpot." But what's in a name?

Sexpot or Jarr, Cookie was obviously quite a dish. She sprawled, in obvious *deshabillé*, on the couch, and like the professional stripper she was, proceeded to bare her *psyche*.

After a dozen or so previous sessions, Dr. Placebo had succeeded in teaching her the technique of free association, and now she obediently launched into a form of *monologhorrea*.

"I had a dream under very peculiar circumstances the other night . . . I was sleeping alone . . . and in it I was a geek . . ."

"One moment, please," murmured Dr. Placebo, softly. "You say you were a geek? One of those carnival performers who bites the heads off of chickens?"

Cookie shook her auburn locks impatiently. "Not chickens," she explained. "I was very rich in this dream, and I was geeking a peacock." She frowned. "In fact, I was so rich I was Marie Antoinette. And they dragged me out for execution, and I looked at the executioner and said, 'Dr. Guillotine, I presume?' and he said, 'Please, no names—you must be the soul of indiscretion.' So then I woke up and it was four in the morning and I looked out of the window at this big neon sign that says OK USED CARS. You know something, Doc? I'd never buy an OK USED CAR. And I'd never eat at a place that says EAT. Or one that says FINE FOOD. And I'd never be buried in a funeral parlor approved by Duncan Hines. Do you think I'm superstitious? They say it's bad luck to walk under a black cat."

"Perhaps," said Dr. Placebo, sagely. "And then again, perhaps not. We must learn to relate, to adjust. Life is just a bowl of theories." He gazed at her piercingly. "The dream sequence is merely symbolism. Out with it now—face the truth. Why did you really wake up at four in the morning?"

"Because I had to go to the

bathroom," Cookie snapped. "No, really, Doc, I'll level with you. It's the love bit. That damn' Max keeps getting me down, because he's so jealous of Harry, only that's ridiculous because I don't like Harry at all, it's really Fred, on account of he reminds me of Jerry, the guy I'm crazy about. Or almost as crazy about as Ray." She paused, biting her lip. "Oh, I hate men!" she said.

"Ummm-hmmmm," said Dr. Placebo, doodling on a scratch-pad with which he was ostensibly taking notes but actually drawing phallic symbols which looked suspiciously like dollar-signs.

"Is that all you got to say?" demanded Cookie, sitting up. "Fifty bucks an hour I'm paying, and for what? My nerves are killing me. You got any happy pills, Doc?"

"Happy pills?"

"Tranquilizers, or like whatever. Remember that stuff you gave me last month?"

"Oh, the cantharides."

"Yeah." Cookie smiled happily. "That was the greatest!"

Dr. Placebo frowned; his memories did not coincide with Cookie's, particularly when he recalled the frantic aftermath of that episode when he had to drag her bodily from the ninth floor of the local YMCA. But the experimental urge was strong.

Few men could look at Cookie without feeling the urge to experiment.

"Well, there's something new," he said, cautiously.

"Give."

"It's called a Time Capsule. Alters the subjective time-sense and—er—all that jazz." He found himself lapsing into the idiom with Cookie; she was the sort who inspired lapses.

"Meaning what?"

"I'm not quite sure. I imagine it slows down the reflexes."

"Relaxes you, huh? That's for baby."

"You'll have to take it here, under test conditions."

"The mad scientist bit? You are gonna hypnotize me and get fresh, is that it?"

"Nothing of the sort. I merely mean I must observe any side-effects."

"Stuff really turns you on, eh?" Cookie bounced up happily. "Well, I'm for kicks. Spill the pill for me, Bill."

Dr. Placebo went to the water-cooler and filled a paper cup. Then he carefully extracted one of the yellow capsules from its cellophane container. He handed it and the water to Cookie.

She gulped and swallowed.

Then she lay back on the couch. "Wow, I'm in Dizzyville," she whispered. "Everything's like round and round—no squares—"

Her voice trailed off, and for a very good reason.

Now it was Dr. Placebo's turn to gulp and swallow, as he stared down at the empty couch.

Cookie had disappeared.

"Where is she?" Ray Connors demanded. "Come on, where is she?"

Dr. Placebo sighed. He felt a horrible depression, quite unlike the shapely depression which had been left in the couch by Cookie's body.

"She—she cancelled her appointment this afternoon," he said, weakly.

"But I drove her over," the mustached young man insisted. "Went downstairs to do a bit of business—I'm booking a flea circus out in Los Angeles and I had to see about renting a dog so the troupe could travel in comfort—and then I came right back up to your office to wait. The receptionist told me Cookie was inside. So what happened?"

"I—I wish I knew," Dr. Placebo told him, truthfully. "She was lying right there on the couch when she vanished."

"Vanished?"

Dr. Placebo nodded. "Into thin air."

"Thin air, fat air, I don't believe it." Connors advanced on the pudgy little psychiatrist. "Come on, where you hiding the body?"

"She vanished, I tell you," Dr. Placebo wailed. "All I did was give her one of these sample pills—"

He indicated the packet on his desk-top and Connors picked it up. "This says *Time Capsules*, not *Vanishing Cream*," he snorted. "Look, Doc, I'm not one of your loony patients. I'm an agent, and you can't con me. So you got sore at Cookie and pushed her out of the window—*this* I can understand. Why don't you admit it and let me call the cops? We could get a big spread on this." He began to pace the floor rapidly. "Real headline stuff—JEALOUS HEADSHRINKER SLAYS BEAUTIFUL PATIENT. Why, we'll push the Finch trial right off the front page! Think of the angles; exclusive interview rights, sob-stories to all the women's magazines, a nice big ghostwritten best-seller, a fat movie deal. Doc, you've got a fortune in your lap and you don't know enough to cross your legs! Now for ten per cent, I'll handle everything, you won't have to worry—"

Dr. Placebo sighed softly. "I told you," he murmured. "She swallowed one of these pills and disappeared."

"Fiddlesticks," said Connors. "Or words to that effect." And before Dr. Placebo could stop him, he walked over to the couch, sat down, ripped a pill from the cellophane confines of the pack-

age, and popped it into his mouth.

"No—don't!" cried the Doctor.

Connors shrugged. "You see? I swallowed one and nothing happens. I'm still here." He leaned back. "So how about it, Doc, you gonna level with me? Maybe you didn't push her out of the window. Maybe you carved her up and stuck the pieces in your filing-cabinet. Hey, that's an even better angle—MAD BUTCHER CARVES CHICK! Or RIPPER GETS FLIPPER WITH STRIPPER. For ten per cent of the gross, I'll fix it so you—."

Young Mr. Connors fell back on the couch and closed his eyes.

"Hey, what was in that last drink?" he mumbled. "I can't see."

Dr. Placebo advanced upon him nervously. "That pill," he gasped. "Let me phone Dr. Glutea down the hall—he's a G.U. man, maybe he has a stomach-pump—"

Connors waved him away. "Never mind," he whispered, faintly. "I can see, now."

This was strange, to say the least, for he still had his eyes closed. Dr. Placebo bent over him, not daring to touch his rigid body.

"Yeah, I can see. Stars. Nothing but stars. You running one of those science fiction movies, Doc?

"Sure, I'm hip now. There's the world. Or is it? I can see North America and South America, but where are all those funny lines?"

"What funny lines?"

"Like in all the geography books—isn't there supposed to be latitude and longitude?"

"That's just on maps."

"I dig. This isn't a map, Doc. It's for real . . . but it can't be . . . no . . . no . . ."

"Please, Mr. Connors, pull yourself together!"

"I'm pulling myself apart . . . oh, Doc, if you saw what I see . . . like crazy, the world inside a big egg-timer up in the sky . . . sort of an hour-glass, you know the bit?"

"Go on," murmured Dr. Placebo.

"There's sand or something running out of the end, into the other half of the timer . . . and now . . . a big claw, bigger than the whole world . . . reaching out and squeezing . . . squeezing the guts out of the earth . . . *squeeeeeee* . . ."

"Go on," repeated Dr. Placebo. But it wasn't necessary, for Connors had already gone on.

The couch was empty.

The little psychiatrist blinked and shook his head. He walked over to the desk and, indulging in a symbolic funeral, buried his face in his hands. "Now what?"

he groaned. "Physician, heal thyself."

Then he sat up and took stock of the situation. After all he *was* a physician; moreover, a skilled analyst. The thing to do was to consider the problem logically. There were several obvious courses of action.

First of all, he could call the police. He'd simply explain what had happened, they would simply not believe him, and he'd simply go to the gas-chamber.

Secondly, he could tell his receptionist. She was a sweet young thing, and madly in love with him as a Father-Image. Her reaction was predictable; she'd pop him into her car and they'd drive off to Mexico together, where they'd live happily ever after until she ran off with a bullfighter. No, the gas chamber was better. But why wait, when there were even faster methods?

Maybe he could adopt some of Connors' ideas to his own use. Perhaps he could jump out of the window, or cut himself up into little pieces and hide in the file-cabinet. Merely a logical extension of filing one's fingernails.

No, he was irrational. He needed time to think. Time to think—

Dr. Placebo stared at the celophane envelope which still rested on his desk where Connors

had tossed it after taking the capsule. *Time Capsule.*

"Alters time-sense both subjectively and objectively." Suppose it were true? Once again he picked up the cryptic literature and studied it closely. And all of a sudden he found himself translating fluently. Only the vowels were missing.

Instructions

Enclosed samples for professional use only. Each is capable of producing temporal dislocation permanently and translating user into another continuum or time vector."

It was plain English, all right, and even the last line of the literature made sense now. He read it slowly.

"Don't get your vowels in an uproar."

Excellent advice. Advice from an area where the time-sense was altered, where linguistics were attuned to another tempo, where others marched to a different drummer.

Cookie had vanished suddenly, Connors slowly. Why the difference? Perhaps because Cookie had taken the capsule with water and Connors swallowed his dry. Took a while for the gelatin coating to dissolve.

Funny, Connors seeing those hallucinations. All very symbolic

—the earth in an egg-timer and somebody squeezing it; the sands of time running forth. Running where? Running out, that's where. In another minute his time would run out; the receptionist would run in and ask where his patients were.

He had lost his patients. He had lost his patience. It all came back to the same thing—call the police, run off to Mexico, jump out of the window, or kill himself and stuff his dead body in the file. Sort of a necro-file. Maybe he deserved to die, if he was capable of making puns like that. It would rise up from the grass over his grave to haunt him, for the pun is mightier than the sword—

No time for that now.

No time.

But a Time Capsule—

He picked up the cellophane container gingerly.

Why not?

It was a way out. Way out, indeed—but a way.

For one idiotic instant, Dr. Placebo took a good hard look at himself. A fat, foolish little man, driven by greed, who had never known love in all his life except as a professional Father-Image. A man surrounded by sensualists like Cookie and opportunists like Connors. What was he doing here in the first place?

"I am a stranger and a Freud, in a world I never made."

It was a terrible realization, a bitter pill to swallow. But swallow it he must. There was no other choice. Fingers trembling, he extracted the last Time Capsule from the packet and raised it to his lips. He swallowed.

There was no sensation. He floated over to the water-cooler and poured a drink. It gurgled down his throat. And then came the kaleidoscope, engulfing him.

Five minutes later his receptionist walked into the empty office. She inspected it, panicked, but eventually recovered and did what any sensible girl would do under the circumstances—called the Bureau of Missing Persons.

There was no answer . . .

There was, of course, no kaleidoscope. Nor did Dr. Placebo find himself entrapped in a cosmic egg-timer whirling in outer space. No huge hand stretched forth to menace his reason and he knew that he had not died.

But there was a dizzying sensation and he waited until it ceased before he allowed the autonomy of his nervous system to resume sway and blinked his eyes open once more.

Dr. Placebo was prepared for almost anything. If, indeed, the Time Capsule had been efficacious, he knew that he could have gone an infinite distance forward or backward in temporal dimension. Long condition-

ing through attendance at monster-movies led him to expect either the titanic vistas of *papier-maché* cities of the far future or *papier-maché* dinosaurs of the distant past. In either era, he knew, nothing would bear the slightest resemblance to the world he had lived in, except that the women of the future or the prehistoric age would still wear lipstick and mascara.

There was just one thing Dr. Placebo didn't expect to see when he opened his eyes—the familiar walls of his very own private office.

But that's where he found himself, sitting upon his own couch. And most uncomfortably, too, because he was wedged between Cookie and Connors.

"Oh, here you are," Cookie greeted him. "Where'd you go, Doc?"

"Nowhere. I've been here all the time. Where did *you* go?"

"Never left the couch."

"But you weren't here when I showed up," Ray Connors interrupted. "Then I saw you and I lost the Doc."

Dr. Placebo shook his head. "That's not the way it happened at all! First she disappeared and then you disappeared. I stayed right where I am."

"You weren't right where you are a minute ago."

"Neither were you."

"What does it matter? We're back, now," Connors said. "I told you those pills were fakes."

"I'm not so sure. We didn't travel in space, obviously, because we're in the same place we started. But if the capsules affect objective time—"

"So each of us passed out and lost a couple minutes. Big deal." Cookie sniffed and swayed to her feet.

She glanced curiously at the calendar on the desk. "Hey, Doc," she called. "What kind of a month is Jly?"

Instantly, Dr. Placebo was at her side. "You're right," he groaned. "It does say 'Jly'. And that's not my writing on the note-pad. Who is this 'Dr. My'?"

"Maya," said a soft voice. "We don't write the vowels but we pronounce them. Indoctrinated associative reflex."

Placebo turned to confront the newcomer to the room. She was a tall, plump, gray-haired woman with a rounded face and shoe-button eyes. She wore a plain smock and a bright smile.

"You must be the new patients," she observed, glancing at the trio. "Armond did his job well." She glanced again at the startled faces before her. "I had hoped for a random sampling, but you actually exceed my expectations."

"We're not patients," Dr.

Placebo exploded. "I happen to be a practicing psychiatrist. And expectations be damned—we want explanations!"

"Gladly given." The woman who called herself Maya moved into the chair behind the desk. "Please sit down."

The trio retreated to the couch.

"First of all," Dr. Placebo began, "Where are we?"

"Why, here, of course."

"But—"

"Please." Maya lifted a plump hand. "You don't deny that you are here, do you? If so, you're more disturbed than I thought. Believing yourself to be a psychiatrist is dangerous enough without any further disorientation."

"I am a psychiatrist!" Dr. Placebo shouted. "And this used to be in my office."

"It still is, in another temporal vector. But when you swallowed one of Armond's little capsules, you entered a parallel continuum."

"Hey, how about making with like English?" Cookie demanded. "I don't dig."

"This must be one of those crazy planets," Connors muttered. And she's an alien." He stood up and approached the desk. "So take me to your leader."

"Leader? There is no leader."

"Then who runs things around here?"

"Things run themselves."

"But who's the boss?"

"We all are."

Maya turned back to the girl. "I note your saying that you don't dig. Allow me to reassure you—in our society there is no need for physical labor. I'm sure you'll find a worthy niche here for whatever you are qualified to do."

"Wait a minute," Connors interrupted. "Nobody books this chick except me. I'm her agent."

"Agent?"

"Yeah, her manager, like. I find her work and collect my ten per cent."

"Ten per cent of what—the work?"

"No, the money."

"Ah, yes, money. I'd forgotten about that."

"You'd forgotten about money?" Dr. Placebo asked, excitedly. "Very peculiar symptom indeed. Rejection of the economic incentive—"

But Maya ignored him. Again she addressed herself to the girl. "Might I inquire just what sort of work you perform?"

"I'm a stripper."

"I see," Maya said, though it was obvious she didn't. "And just what do you strip?"

"Why, myself, of course."

"Oh, an exhibitionist." Maya smiled. "That's very nice. We

have lots of them around. Of course, they don't get any recompense for it here, outside of their own pleasure."

"You mean they do it for fun?" Cookie demanded. "Standing up there on a bare stage with the wind blowing up your G-string and letting a lot of meatheads watch you break your fingernails on your zippers—this you call kicks?"

"I've had it," Connors announced, leaning over the desk. "The way I figure it, there's just two answers to the whole *kocka-mamie* deal. Either you're squirrely or we've been kidnapped. Maybe both. But I'm calling the fuzz."

"Fuzz?"

"Law. Coppers. Police."

"There is no police force. Unnecessary. For that matter, no method of outside communication."

"You don't have a telephone?"

"Unnecessary."

"Then, lady, you'd better start hollering for help. Because if you don't send us back where we came from in thirty seconds, I am going to lean on you."

"Why wait?" Cookie bounded to her feet, raced over to the window, and flung it open. She leaned out.

"Help!" she yelled. "Hel—"

Her voice trailed off. "Holy Owned Subsidiary!" she whis-

pered, faintly. "Sneak a preview at *this*!"

Connors and Dr. Placebo moved to her side and stared out at *this*.

This was the city below them, a city they knew as well as they knew the month of the year.

But the month was Jly, and the city too was oddly altered. The buildings seemed familiar enough, but they were not nearly so high here in the downtown section, nor were there so many of them. No traffic hummed in the streets below, and pedestrians moved freely down the center of the avenues. The sides of the structures were not disfigured by billboards or painted advertisements. But the most drastic difference was a subtle one—everything was plainly visible in clear bright sunlight. There was no smoke, no soot, no smog.

"Another continuum," Dr. Placebo murmured. "She's telling the truth."

"I still want out," Connors said. He balled his fists. "Lady, I'm asking you in a nice way—send us back."

Maya shook her head. "I can't possibly do so until next week. Armond must return and prepare the antidotes."

Cookie frowned. "You still insist we got here just because we swallowed some kind of Mickey

Finn? You didn't smuggle us aboard a spaceship or whatever?"

"Please, my dear, let me explain. As I understand it, in your time-vector you employ a variety of drugs—heroin, *cannabis indica*, various preparations such as marijuana and *peyotl* which affect the time-sense."

"I never touch the stuff," Cookie snarled. "I'm clean, see?"

"But there are people who use these concoctions, and it does affect their time-sense. Their subjective time-sense, that is. A minute can become an eternity, or a day can be compressed into an instant."

"I buy that," Connors said.

"My friend Armond has merely extended the process. He perfected a capsule which actually produces a corporeal movement in time. Since it is impossible to move into a future which does not yet exist, or into a past which exists no longer, one merely moves obliquely into a parallel time-stratum. There are thousands upon thousands of worlds, each based upon the infinite combinations and permutations of possibility. All co-exist equally. You have merely gone from one such possible world to another."

"Merely," Cookie muttered. "So Connors was right. You kidnapped us. But why?"

"Call it an experiment. Armond and I worked together, to determine the sociological variations existing in several continuums. You will remain here a week, until he returns. During that time, let me assure you, no harm can possibly befall anyone. You'll be treated as honored guests."

Ray Connors stepped closer to Cookie. "Don't worry, baby—I'll protect you," he said. "You know I only got eyes for—*wow!*"

Wow stood in the doorway. She was about eighteen, with baby-blue eyes, but any resemblance to infancy ended right there.

"This is Lona," Maya told him. "She will be your hostess during your stay here."

Lona smiled up at Connors and extended her hand. "I already have my instructions," she said. "Shall we go now?"

"Over my dead body!" Cookie screeched. "If you think for one minute I'm gonna let you fall out of here with that hunk of *Bastille*-bait, you got another—"

It was her turn to react, when the tall young man entered. He too was about eighteen, but big for his age.

"I'm Kerry," he said. "Your host during the coming week. If you'll be good enough to accompany me—"

"I'm good enough," Cookie told him.

"Now wait a minute," Connors interrupted. "If you go off with this gorilla, how'm I gonna protect you?"

"You better worry about protecting yourself, buster," Cookie told him, eyeing the clinging blonde. She turned to the waiting Kerry. "Off to Funville," she said, and swept out.

"Shall we go?" Lona asked Connors. "A week is so little time, and I've so much to learn—"

"That's the spirit," Connors said. "Come on."

As they exited, Dr. Placebo glanced at Maya. "And what is in store for me—something out of *Lolita*?"

The plump woman frowned at the unfamiliar reference. "Why, you'll be my guest. Stretch out on the couch and make yourself comfortable. I expect there are a few questions you'd like to ask."

Dr. Placebo was beyond resistance. Meekly, he sank down on his own couch—which wasn't really his own couch any more—and Maya promptly joined him.

"Really," spluttered the little man. "This is hardly approved psychotherapeutic procedure."

"I'm not a psychotherapist," Maya told him. "I'm your hostess."

"Need you be so hospitable?" Dr. Placebo protested.

"My feet hurt," Maya explain-

ed, kicking off her shoes and wriggling her toes. "Besides, is there any rule that says you have to conduct a sociological experiment standing up?"

"This is an experiment?"

"Of course. Why did you think Armond brought you here?" She stared at him levelly.

"I was going to ask about that. There are so many things I don't understand."

"Look into my eyes. Perhaps I can tell you better in that way than by questions and answers."

"Hypnosis? Telepathy? Rubbish!"

"Three labels, in as many words. Just forget that you're a scientist for a moment and open your mind. Look into my eyes. There, that's better. Keep looking. What do you see there?"

Dr. Placebo stared fixedly. His breathing altered oddly and his voice, when he spoke, seemed to come from far away.

"I see—*everything*," he whispered.

There was the world he came from, and there was *this* world. But these were only two in a co-existent infinity of possible states of being, each subject to an individual tempo, and each ruled by the Law of the Universe, which men call *If*.

There was a world where the dinosaurs survived, and the birds who ate their eggs perished. There was a world in which

amphibians crawled out upon the land and found it uninviting, then swarmed back into the sea. There was a world in which the Persians defeated Alexander, and oriental civilization flourished on the site of what would never be Copenhagen.

Dr. Placebo, guided by some power of selection emanating from Maya's will, sampled a dozen of these possibilities in rapid succession.

He saw worlds which had developed in a manner very similar to his own, with just a tiny difference.

A world in which a few tiny birds wheeled and took flight at the sight of sailing vessels, so that Columbus never noticed them and sailed on his course to the coast of Mexico where he and his men were quickly captured by the Aztecs and enslaved. So quickly did the inhabitants of Central America learn the arts of their prisoners that within a hundred years they built ships and weapons of their own, with which they conquered Europe . . .

A world where it didn't rain along the Flemish plains one night early in the nineteenth century—and next morning, Napoleon's cavalry charged to victory across a dry field instead of tumbling into a sunken road. After winning Waterloo, there was no Bourbon restoration, no

ensuing Republic, no Commune, no rise of Communist theory, no German nation or Russian Revolution, no World Wars. And Napoleon VI was emperor of all the earth . . .

Dr. Placebo saw the world in which the Hessians overheard the sound of oars one Christmas Eve at Trenton, and hanged George Washington. He saw the world where an axe slipped, and a young rail-splitter named Abe Lincoln lost his left leg and ended up as the town drunk of Magnolia, Ill. He saw a world in which an eminent scientist suffered a minor toothache and neglected to investigate the queer mould which he'd observed, with the result that two of the men who might have subsequently developed atomic power installations died of disease instead, because there was no penicillin to save them, and a whole continent subsequently plunged into war and . . .

Faster and faster the worlds whirled; the one in which Adolf Hitler was just a man who painted houses and Winston Churchill painted landscapes fulltime instead of on Sundays . . . a world in which a real detective named Sherlock Holmes wrote a highly-successful series of stories about an imaginary London physician whom he called Arthur Conan Doyle . . . a

world ruled by great apes, and a somewhat similar world ruled by a teen-age aristocracy who were proud of their blue genes.

"Possible," murmured Maya's voice, from a great distance. "All possible. Do you understand, now?"

Dr. Placebo sensed that he was nodding in reply.

"Good. Then, *this* world."

The panorama of impressions expanded, on a multi-leveled basis, so that Dr. Placebo was aware of sweeping generalization and specific example simultaneously. And slowly, a picture evolved. Dr. Placebo sensed and surveyed it with growing horror.

"But it *can't* be!" he heard himself muttering. "No Freud—and Havelock Ellis entering a monastery at twenty-two—no psychiatrists—no wonder you all became disturbed."

"*You're* disturbed," Maya's voice told him, calmly. "We're not. Look again."

Dr. Placebo looked again.

He looked at a world in which society was conditioned by biological principles, with Kinsey-like overtones; a world which lived in accordance to certain basic postulates. And as the examples expanded, Maya's voice provided accompaniment.

"As in *your* world, the sexual drive in the human male reaches its height between the ages of 16

and 26, whereas in the females the sex-urge is highest between 28 and 40. The only difference is that in *our* world this biological fact is accepted, and acted upon.

"Accordingly, our young men, at 16, are permitted to establish relationships with women of 28 or older, for any period of time up to 10 years. During this decade of association, there is no procreation—and, of course, no domestic or emotional responsibilities.

"At 26, the males are permitted to establish another relationship, again for a decade or so, with the females aged 16 and upwards. During this time, reproduction is encouraged, for the females are young and healthy and the males are fully mature; they lavish affection upon their offspring, who are—of course—turned over to the care of the state when they reach the age of 6.

"As both males and females reach 40 or thereabouts, they can again change their partners and seek permanent or temporary companionship within a domestic relationship—but without reproducing.

"Thus the sex-drive is fully satisfied during its period of maximum intensity, the reproductive urge is given full sway at a time likely to be most beneficial to both parents and off-

spring, and the social needs of later life are gratified without the rancor, tensions, frustrations, and naggingly permanent obligations which are the fruit of most monogamous marriages in your world. Simple enough, isn't it?"

Dr. Placebo sat up. He was once again in full possession of his faculties, all of which were strained beyond credulity.

"It's absurd!" he shouted. "You're going against all natural instinct—"

"Are we?"

Maya smiled. "Our society is actually founded on a realistic basis—pure biology. In the animal kingdom, 'fatherhood' as we know it does not exist. The male may protect its spawn for a time and feed the pregnant female, but it does not safeguard or exhibit affection for its young over any extended period of time, except in your 'moral' textbooks for children or the cinematic fantasies of your Mr. Disney. In many species, the male does not even secure food for the female, let alone 'support a family'. This is an artificial concept, yet your whole society is based upon it and everyone seems to believe that it's 'natural'.

"And when your poets and writers and philosophers envision an 'ideal' society, it is merely an extension of the same basic misconceptions with an attempt

to put a little more of what you call 'justice' into them—even though one of your own writers, Archibald MacLeish, in his play *J.B.*, so wisely observes, '*There is no justice; there is only love.*' Ours is a world founded on love, and it begins by setting aright the biological basis of love."

"Monstrous!" Dr. Placebo exploded. "You've destroyed the fundamentals of civilization—the home—the family—"

"The so-called home and so-called family have destroyed the fundamentals of *your* civilization," Maya told him. "That's why you therapists flourish, in a sick world of emotionally-twisted youngsters who grow up as overly-frustrated or overly-aggressive adults; a world of prurience and poverty, of sin without atonement and atonement without sin, a world of bombs without balms. Don't look at your prejudices and your theories; look at the *results*. Are the people of your world truly happy, Doctor? *Are they?*"

"I suppose your way is better?" Dr. Placebo permitted himself a slight sneer.

"See for yourself," Maya suggested. "Look into my eyes—"

Dr. Placebo found himself staring and sharing; it was all a matter of viewpoint, he told himself.

He saw a world in which there was no transference of aggres-

sions, due to sexual problems; a world devoid of jealousy and fear and secret guilts.

There was, to begin with, a complete change in the pattern of courtship; the element of rivalry, of competition, was almost eliminated. Male and female paired first for mutual pleasure, without the necessity of seeking the almost impossible combination of perfect lover, ideal helpmate, good provider, wise companion, and social prize which dogs most young people in their choice.

Later on, male and female paired for the purpose of reproduction; children born of the union of these matings were given a healthy environment of genuine love during the years when they were most loveable—and most subject to lasting psychological impressions. Then, at the time when they became encumbrances in a complex social order, they were turned over to well-organized state establishments for education and proper development.

Finally, male and female allied on the basis of fully matured judgments; as companions with mutual tastes and interests. Their early sexual drives fully satisfied, their reproductive drive fulfilled, their responsibilities in these areas ended, they were free to seek permanent or temporary *liaisons* on a fully

realistic basis of compatibility.

Inevitably, there were other—and far-reaching—results.

For one thing, a change in personality-values—the notion of what constituted a “good” or a “bad” individual differed greatly from those prevalent in Dr. Placebo’s world.

Less time was wasted, by young and old alike, in false and exaggerated emphasis upon presumably “masculine” or “feminine” attributes. A 16-year-old boy could *honestly* prove his masculinity, with full approval and satisfaction, on a biological basis, instead of spending most of his energy on football, juvenile delinquency, surreptitious indulgence in alcohol and narcotics and the assumption of an outward brutality designed to impress the female. A 16-year-old girl could fulfil her biological function in maternity instead of retreating into narcissism, virginity-fantasies, or a rebellious and unsatisfactory promiscuity.

The young man found sympathy and understanding with an older woman during his initial relationships, and learned to appreciate these qualities. The young woman found steadiness and strength in an older man, and was not impressed by reckless exhibitionism and irresponsible behavior. When the age-patterns of later relationships

were reversed, an even greater mutual understanding prevailed; in the final maturity, there was a peace and a satisfaction born of genuine love and respect. In this world, men and women actually *enjoyed* one another's company, and there was no rivalry.

As a result, there was no fear of the domestic situation; it was not a life-long trap in which both parties became enslaved to a consumer economy because they had to "preserve" a so-called home at all costs. Because there was no set and permanent family status, the element of economic competition virtually vanished; there was no need to pile up great accretions of consumer-goods for conspicuous consumption or as substitutes for genuine satisfactions. And there was no "Inheritance." The state regulated employment and recompense but did so benevolently—for there was no familial tension-source to spawn the guilt, hate, frustration and aggression which resulted in individual crime and mass warfare. Hence a "police state" proved unnecessary. Simple miscegenation had done away with national, racial and religious strife. And the limited 12-year breeding span had done away with population pressure; there was abundance for everyone. Social and economic freedom followed as a matter of course.

Perhaps most important of all, there was a great increase in creativity and the development of aesthetics.

Dr. Placebo began to realize why, when he looked out the window, there were no advertising displays—why there was no need of automotive traffic or "quick communication" devices, or any variety of artificial stimulants, escape-devices, or gilded carrots designed to keep the donkeys in perpetual harness as they tugged their cartloads of woe along the road of life.

There was actually plenty of time to *live* in this world; no claws were squeezing; within this hourglass lay no danger of an eruption or explosion.

All this Maya showed him, and much more. Until at last, Dr. Placebo hurled himself upright again and tore his gaze away.

"Fine!" he commented. "Wonderful! Now I know why you found a youthful hostess for Ray Connors and a young host for Cookie. And maybe it does work, at that."

"I'm glad you think so," Maya said. "Because that was Armond's plan, you see."

"I don't see," Dr. Placebo confessed.

"For some time Armond and others have used the capsules to visit worlds in other time-vectors. Most of them were either too alien in their patterns or too

dangerous to explore, but yours seemed most similar to our own.

"Somewhere along the line, your world went wrong in the area of social-sexual relationships, but we have studied your *mores* and folkways and decided to make a radical experiment. Armond believed *we* could, if necessary, live in *your* world—but of course, we wouldn't want to. He then determined to discover if *you* could live in *our* world. That's why he went down to hand out a limited number of sample pills—in the hopes of getting a representative assortment of specimens here for observation. One week should be long enough to determine your reaction—"

Dr. Placebo stood up.

"One minute is all it takes," he announced. "At least, as far as I'm concerned."

"You are a wise man, Dr. Placebo," Maya said. "It didn't take you long to see how sensibly we live, how sanely we have ordered our lives."

"That is correct," Dr. Placebo murmured, and then his voice swept upwards shrilly. "And that's just why I want out of here! I'm a psychiatrist, and a highly successful one. What place have I in a world where nobody is emotionally disturbed or maladjusted? Why, I'd starve to death in a month! I tell you, all this sanity is crazy—"

Suddenly he doubled up and fell back upon the couch.

"Why, whatever is the matter?" Maya cried.

"Ulcer," Dr. Placebo groaned. "Kicks up on me every once in a while. Purely psychosomatic, but it hurts like hell."

"Wait just a minute," Maya soothed. "I'll get you some milk."

And in exactly a minute, she was back with a glass. Dr. Placebo drank it slowly and gradually relaxed. It was good milk—damned good milk, he reflected bitterly, and no wonder. In a lousy, perfect world like this, the cows were probably more contented than any back on Earth . . . It figured!

"All right," said Ray Connors, pausing in his restless pacing to face Cookie and Dr. Placebo. "I got to talk fast because there's not much time. For a whole week I've been figuring out how to get a chance to see you two alone here in the office without Maya or any of the rest of these squares butting in. Because I got a billion-dollar idea by the tail and all I need is your help."

"How's Lona?" Cookie inquired.

"The chick?" Ray Connors smiled. "Okay, okay. But that's not important."

"Isn't it?" Cookie frowned. "You know, this guy Terry is the greatest. He's so—so sweet."

Treats me like I was some kind of princess—”

“Never mind that jazz,” Connors interrupted. “We got no time.”

“Your idea?” Dr. Placebo inquired.

“Okay, now hear this. This is a square setup, dig? Both of you must have noticed what I did—everybody gets along with everyone else, there’s no muscle, no sweat. Strictly Loveville.”

“Yeah, isn’t it wonderful?” Cookie sighed. “That Terry—”

“I’ll say it’s wonderful!” Connors exulted. “The whole setup is a pushover for a couple of hip operators like us. I started to figure things out, and you know, I think the three of us could really do it?”

“Do what?” inquired Dr. Placebo.

“Why, take over, of course!” Connors eyed him elatedly. “Look, we each got our own racket, and all we need to do is start working. Cookie here knows how to turn on the glamor. Me, I’m the best combination agent and flack in the business. You’re a skull-specialist, you know about psychology and all that crud. Suppose we just team up and go to work?”

“Remember that old gag about Helen of Troy, or whoever—the gal whose face launched a thousand flips, something like that?

Started a big war over her, didn’t they? Well, we got Cookie here. Suppose I started beating the drums, working up a little publicity, spreading the word about how this chick is the hottest dish in the whole pantry? And you coach me on the psychology, Doc.

“You know the way they got things rigged here—young gals with middle-aged guys, middle-aged guys with young gals, old folks at home together. Well, it would be the easiest thing in the world to upset the whole apple-cart. Get the kids excited about Cookie, and the old daddy-types, too. Teach ’em something about sex-appeal. You know what’ll happen. Inside of a month we can start opening up schools—regular courses to give all the chicks lessons on how to really land a man and hang onto him. Give ’em all the techniques on how to play hard-to-get. And that means the works—we bring out a line of cosmetics, fashions, beauty-parlor treatments, promote jewelry and perfume and luxury items.

“We’ll have the men flipping, too. They don’t use money in this crazy system, but we ought to be able to take our cut in land and services. I tell you, they’re so innocent it’ll be like taking candy from a baby. Inside of a year we can work our way up so that we’ll be running the whole

world! Think of it—no police, no army, nothing to stop us! Wait until we bring in advertising, and juke-boxes, and hot-rods, and pro football and falsies—”

“You intend to transform this world into a reasonable reproduction of our own, is that correct?” asked Dr. Placebo.

“Reasonable is right,” Connors snapped. “What’s to stop us?”

“I am,” said Cookie. “I don’t buy it.”

“You don’t—*what?*”

“I like it just the way it is,” she murmured. “Look, Ray, let’s face it. I’m pushing thirty, dig? And for the past fifteen years I been knocking around, getting my jollies in just the kind of a world you want to turn this into. Well, I had it, and no thanks. What good did it ever do me? I ended up a second-rate stripper, tied to a second-rate nogoodnik like you spending all my extra loot on Doc’s couch.

“I don’t need to be Helen of Troy here. I’m just Cookie, and that’s good enough for Terry—and believe me, he’s good enough for me. I never had it so nice as this past week, believe me. Why louse it up?”

“Okay, so who’s begging? You think you’re the only chick I can promote? I got Lona. She’s plenty square—one of those real sick good-hearted types—

but I can twist her around my little finger. So I’ll slap a little makeup on her, teach her a few tricks, and we’re off and running.” Connors wheeled to face Dr. Placedo.

“How about it, Doc? You want in, don’t you?”

“You’re quite sure you can do all this?” Dr. Placebo murmured. “It’s a big program for one man to tackle.”

“Yeah, but we got a natural. No competition. No opposition. Nobody that’s hip. They’ll never know what hit ‘em. In fact, they all love each other so damned much they don’t suspect anyone could ever pull a fast one, and they’ll cooperate just for asking.”

Connors walked over to the open window and gazed out at the sunlit city.

“Look at it, Doc,” he said. “All laid out and waiting for us to carve. Like the old saying, the world’s our oyster.”

“That’s right.” Dr. Placebo moved to his side, nodding thoughtfully. “And the more I think it over, the more I believe you. You could do it, quite easily.”

“I damn’ well *will* do it,” Connors asserted. “And if you and Cookie chicken out, I’ll make it alone.”

Dr. Placebo hesitated, shrugged, and glanced at Cookie. She

nodded. He put his hand on Connors' shoulder and smiled.

"A good idea," he muttered. "Make it alone, then."

And with an agile dexterity somewhat surprising in an older man, he pushed Connors out of the window.

The press-agent fell forth into the world that was his oyster; Dr. Placebo and Cookie leaned out and watched as he landed in the oyster-bed below.

"Nice work, Doc," Cookie commented.

He frowned. "That's the last time I'll ever do anything like that," he sighed. "Still, it was necessary to use violence to end violence."

"Yeah. Well, I got to be running along. Terry's waiting for me. We're going to the beach. See you around, Doc?"

"I hope so. I intend to be here for a long, long time," Dr. Placebo turned, staring past the girl, as Maya entered the room.

"Your conference is over?" the plump woman inquired. "Your friend left?"

Cookie nudged Doc in time for him to match her sudden look of consternation.

"A terrible thing just happened," she gasped. "He fell out of the window!"

"Oh, no—" Maya gasped and rushed to the open window, staring down. "How awful! And just when he could have joined you

in returning home—"

"Home?"

"Yes. Armond is back. The week is up, and he'll be able to supply you with time-capsules now. You're free to return to your own world."

"Do we have to go?" Cookie's voice quavered. "I—I want to stay here. Terry and I talked things over, and we hit it off so good together, I was hoping I could just sort of like settle down."

"And what about you?" Maya confronted Dr. Placebo.

"Why—uh—I agree with Cookie. Since that first day, I haven't had the slightest twinge from my ulcer. Something about the milk you serve, I suppose."

"But what about your profession?" Maya asked. "You said yourself that there's no need for a psychiatrist here. And, of course, there's no way of making money."

"I've been thinking about that," Dr. Placebo said. "Couldn't I assist you in your sociological experiments?"

Maya permitted herself a small smile. "Standing up or lying down?" she demanded.

"Er—both." A slow blush spread over the bald expanse of Dr. Placebo's forehead. "I mean, each of us is past forty, and under the existing order of things—well—"

"We'll discuss that later,"

Maya told him, but the smile was broader, now.

She turned to include Cookie in her glance. "Actually, I'm very happy about your decisions. And I shall inform Armond that the experiment was a complete success. I take it your deceased friend intended to stay, also?"

"He did," Cookie answered, truthfully. "He intended to make his mark here." She glanced down at the sidewalk below. "And in a way, I guess he succeeded."

"Then you can adapt," Maya said.

"Of course, we can adapt," Dr. Placebo nodded.

"All right, I shall inform Armond. And we can go into the second stage of the experiment."

"The second stage?" Dr. Placebo echoed.

"Yes. And we'd best hurry because there isn't much time."

Just how Maya got her information, we, of course, shall never know. Perhaps Armond read the papers during his visits to Earth, or maybe he just used his eyes and ears.

At any rate, Maya knew the truth—the truth behind the vision of the green claw squeezing

the sands of time from the hour-glassed earth. She knew that time is running short for this world.

Hence the second stage of the experiment; the stage in which not one but thousands of Armonds will descend in mortal guise or disguise, to pass out millions of time-capsules.

Some will come as salesmen, some as pharmacists, some as physicians. Naturally, techniques of distribution will vary; it will be necessary to disguise the capsules as vitamin tablets, tranquilizers, or simple aspirin. But Dr. Placebo and Cookie will both cooperate with their suggestions, and Armond and his crew are both knowledgeable and efficient.

So, sooner or later, chances are you will be handed a capsule of your own.

Whether you elect to swallow it knowingly or not depends upon whether or not you're willing to swallow the concepts of another world.

If not, of course, there's always a simple choice.

You can stay right where you are, and let this world swallow you. . . .

THE END



A WORLD TO CHOOSE

By POUL ANDERSON

You've been a businessman. You have a home, a wife, all quite ordinary, really. You're near-sighted and soft around the belly. Then you are, suddenly, a giant of a man, fighting, loving, laughing in a wildly romantic world—king of all you survey. You certainly wouldn't go back. Or would you?

ILLUSTRATOR
DOUGLAS

NO, said the little man, "that's one thing I never did find out. Perhaps I could have asked Her, but at those times—in that presence—and with so much else to think about, you know, so much strangeness. . . ." He stared at his empty glass. I remembered it was my turn to buy and signalled the waiter. The bar was dimly lit, but not very busy at this hour, so he came over at once.

"Two more," I said.

"Gosh!" My companion started. He'd not been hinting at all, had merely lost himself in reverie. (Unless he was a consummate actor. But that didn't square with his bespectacled, gray-suited ordinariness.) "I'd better not. My wife'll be meeting me here. I told you that, didn't I? She's shopping today. That's why I didn't go straight home when it turned out I could quit early. Came in here to wait, and—I really shouldn't. I don't have the capacity I once did."

"Oh, another won't hurt you, Mr. Greenough," I urged. Of course I didn't believe his fantasy, but I wanted to hear it out. In a long succession of garrulous tavern acquaintances, encountered once and never again, he was unique. He gave in without a struggle.

"You were saying," I reminded him, "you don't know where this other world lies."

"When might be a better word," he answered. "I'm positive it wasn't simply another planet. The moon and stars were the same as here . . . people . . . most of the animals, if not all. To be sure, the laws of nature appeared somewhat different. Magic did work, within limits. But then, perhaps the Warlocks had discovered principles—action at a distance, similarity, or something—real laws that our physicists haven't come across."

"You mean this might have been our own world, but far in the future?"

"Or the past. I don't suppose archeologists know every civilization which has risen and died in a hundred thousand years. . . . And yet, in a long time, wouldn't the constellations change? They hadn't. I've stood in the prow of the *Dragon*, with the rigging creaking behind me and a kraken rising far out across moonlit waves, and seen the same Great Bear turning around the Pole Star that I've watched from my own suburban back yard."

He took out a cigaret. I lit it for him. "I suppose one of those parallel-universes concepts fits best," he decided. "But I'm not certain. Neither Carl Greenough nor Kendrith of Narr were ever much good at mathematics."

"Then you never knew what the Goddess was, either?"

"Oh, heavens, no. I don't want to. Still don't. She was the Goddess, that's all. If you'd like to speculate about some lonely and beautiful and ultimately evolved being, come from elsewhere to live in that blue cave and give our race as much of Her wisdom as we could stand to have . . . go ahead. You'd need to be in the presence itself before you could really see what a meaningless noise any such 'explanation' is."

He didn't have the air of a religious crank, though love was in his tones. Therefore I ventured to suggest that She treated humans rather cavalierly. Not just interchanging two men's minds, across time or space or might-have-been, though that was bad enough. But making poor Greenough, trapped in a pirate's body; fight and suffer and come close to death, again and again, for a cause which was not his own.

He didn't see it that way. "The cause was Hers," he said.

The waiter brought our drinks. I raised my glass. "Here's to you," I said. "Uh, let's leave off theorizing and get back to the story. For two years, you say, Kendrith's pirates fought along with Emperor Oterron, because Kendrith said to and they didn't know another mind was using their chief's body. But what was Kendrith himself, in Greenough's body, here in this world, what was he doing all the while?"

He shrugged. "Being Carl Greenough. Remember, the mind . . . ego . . . whatever you call it . . . isn't separate from the physical nerves and flesh. It's a function of them. What the Goddess replaced was something very subtle. Each of us had full command of the other's language, reflexes, habits, skills. Actual memories of the other's past were blurred and incomplete, but as time went on they improved. Even initially, we could pass muster, claiming a blow on the head had addled our wits a trifle." He grinned. "And being an up-and-coming New York publisher does call for much the same temperament as being a buccaneer from Narr."

"Toughest on Kendrith, in a way," I said. "He could only wait. If Oterron's war was won, and the pirate boss hadn't gotten killed in the process, the Goddess would put the two minds back in their rightful places. Otherwise—" I stopped. After all, I thought, Kendrith would be alive, though captive in this world. And from Greenough's account, he was a roughneck without close emotional ties.

How must it have been for Greenough himself, waging war among strangers, knowing his wife was living with his body unaware his soul was not therein?

Whoa! At this rate I'd soon believe the yarn!

"Go on," I said hastily. "After two years, you've related, the usurper and his remaining men were beaten back to a single island. What then?"

"It was vital to capture that stronghold," he replied. "As long as Roches held fast, the revolt might break out all over again, for numerous barons in the Empire were still Muntarists. Or his distant relative, the Khan of Barjad, might come riding in from beyond the mountains to help. We knew Roches had one first-class Warlock in his employ, old Yamaz, who could turn air into food and fuel and ammunition. Thus we had no hope of starving them into surrender. Yamaz could also turn himself into a condor and fly out across the Empire, stirring up trouble. We had no comparable adept on our side. (Should I say 'we'? Well, I guess I've been doing it along. May as well continue. The Kendrith body was on Oterron's side, and I naturally tend to think—Anyhow.) You see, then, in spite of the fact that by now Oterron's followers much outnumbered those of Roches, the contest still looked fairly equal. Every day, Roches' daughter Faimma used to walk on the castle walls and taunt us. Her hair blew like fire in the wind. God, she was beautiful! I think thousands of the Portula and Son-tundar men who first supported

Roches, when he overthrew Oterron and seized the crown, I think they did it—against all their own best interests—because Faimma had smiled on them. But us she mocked. . . ."

Greenough climbed to the crow's nest to watch the attack. From there, atop the *Dragon's* mainmast, he could look far across blue waters. They glittered and danced under the westerling sun; warm airs ruffled the long yellow hair in which Kendrith of Narr had taken such pride. But sharply before him stood the image of a northern ocean, green and unrestful, beneath a pine-topped cliff down which the River Oush hurled itself in a thousand-foot leap.

Now cut that out! he told himself. *You never saw Narr. Kendrith did. It's his homeland, and his memories making you homesick, because his body has been so many years down here along the Chabarro coast. If you must get maudlin, then wonder how Ellen's rosebushes are doing in Westchester County.*

He tried to summon his wife's face, for comfort, but found himself too preoccupied. He remembered her eyes and hair were brown, but he couldn't really see them. Perversely, the full-blown recollection of Unia popped into his consciousness and wouldn't go away. She was no one—the

latest of many giggling tavern wenches, meek slave girls, tattooed barbarian lasses, for Carl Greenough had not long remained able to deny the needs of Kendrith's vigorous flesh—but his mind insisted on recalling her in plump and playful detail. Maybe only as a defense against the disturbing lean loveliness of Fiamma.

Trumpets jolted him back to immediacy. There followed a great snapping of catapults, and the gliders lifted.

Their formation was good. In the course of the past two years, a skilled corps of pilots and paratroopers had developed from Greenough-Kendrith's original suggestion, and had done heroic service. But if they could take this island of Tabirra, all else they had accomplished would seem as nothing.

Certainly the amphibious tactics which Greenough had also supplied from his foreign background, and which had enabled the rightful Emperor to recapture the Duchy of Portula . . . certainly they wouldn't work here. Nor would methods more traditional in this world. Greenough focused his telescope with sweating hands.

Like skeletal birds, the gliders soared up. Ships and ships and ships lay below them, the besieging fleet at anchor, sailors of the Empire come to avenge the

years of Roche's misrule, volunteers from a dozen lesser nations come to avenge his slaving raids upon them. Not only square-riggers like the gold-trimmed four-master of Oterron himself, or the oar-powered "aircraft carriers" built to Greenough's order, or the double-ended schooners of the Northland pirates who followed Kendrith were there. Galleons, dhows, feluccas, caravels, catamarans raked the sky with their spars and burdened the water with their hulls. The low sun burned off cannon gaping from gun ports and off pikes crowding the decks, off banners and armor and eyes. The gliders swirled high and lined out toward the island.

"Get 'em!" Greenough heard himself mutter, between teeth clenched so tight that his jaws hurt. "Go get 'em, lads! Cast 'em down into Ginnungagap!"

Was it the waiting that chilled him? Those were his men—some of them pirates, some Imperials, some allies, but all of them trained and sworn at and fought beside, for two wild years—Kendrith's flying tigers, by the Goddess! If something happened to them, while he must sit here with sword in sheath. . . . He remembered how young Iro had talked, on nights when the sea was phosphorescent and the ship walked through cool wet fire. After the war, Iro said, he was

going to outfit a squadron and sail due west across the ocean. For if the world was round, as all modern philosophers agreed, then new lands and limitless adventure must lie on the farther shore. Why wouldn't Kendrith come too, as admiral? Iro worshipped the big Northling more ardently than he did the Goddess Herself. . . . But Iro hunched in a shell of cloth and bamboo, nearing Tabirra's sharp towers, while Kendrith must wait.

No, his shiver was more than excitement. The air was turning cold, darkening, as the wind rose. A haze in the east thickened unnaturally fast to blue-black cloud masses, where lightning crawled. An aurora shimmered green about the castle.

"Yamaz," he said: a curse.

But Lady, Lady, who could have known the Warlock also had power over storm?" He had saved it for his final test, and now—"Come back, you idiots!" Greenough roared futilely at his gliders. "Get back down! You can't make it!"

A few managed a return to the nearest flattop. Most ditched in the sea, where the waves chopped them up but the men swam around until boats could rescue them. Some, Greenough saw dashed to flinders against the island cliffs; and some fell into the surf below, where no man could

live. Two landed crippled within the castle walls. It was not good to think of what Roches' garrison did to their crews.

Carl Greenough's eyes stung and blurred. But Kendrith was more used to death, and Kendrith's nerves and glands powered this body's emotions. Even before the aerial disaster was complete, the pirate chief swarmed down the shrouds to the deck.

Gray-bearded, peg-legged Wolden, who was still the toughest man with a battle ax in all this fleet, stumped over to him. Both were simply clad, wearing little more than their weapons and kilts. There would be time enough to don ringmail and conical helmet when fighting broke out. The mate flung a mantle across his captain's shoulders, for the wind was now cold on the skin, loud in the rigging. The sun was not yet down, but already night came boiling from the east.

"What next, skipper?" asked Wolden through the noise.

Greenough rubbed his jaw. Kendrith had adopted the Southland custom of shaving: an exotic ornamentation, like the golden wristlets and silken robes looted from Chabarroan ports, in the years before he had suddenly decreed the pirates would make alliance with exiled Emperor Oterron. The first anger and despair were leaving him and

a scheme which he had regarded as a desperation measure began to appear more attractive. Greenough was horrified at its recklessness, or should have been, but Kendrith's slam-bang habits were too strong. He found himself looking forward to the attempt. If they carried it off—what a gorgeous exploit! The balladeers would be singing of it a thousand years hence.

"We'll have a go at the gate, the way we once talked about," he said.

"Huh? You serious?" Wolden's battered face, his whole shaggy body, registered dismay. "It's madness, skipper. Plain, scuppered madness. I got a responsibility—my family's been attending yours since the gods first moved north—I can't let you do any such thing till you beget a proper heir. No, sir, I can't."

"You damn well can. Now go find me some volunteers. Don't tell 'em anything except that it's dangerous and they'll need to be uncommon good swimmers. The Goddess only knows what that old bastard Yamaz can do in the way of eavesdropping."

"Oh, I'll get the men, all right," said Wolden. "About forty, d' you think? But you're not going. Bad enough to risk your neck hellraising halfway across the world, but this—! No, sir, you stay here, same as when the gliders went up."

"That was different," said Greenough. "That was only to be part of an operation. The rest of the fleet would've moved in and attacked the gate while the paratroopers kept the garrison busy, and then I'd have been useful. But under the new plan, the swimmers will be the operation, damn near. I'm not going to let my men be chopped into fishbait while I sit here swilling ale."

Or did Greenough speak? Quixotry was more natural to Kendrith's people than to twentieth-century Americans. It felt resoundingly good, too: to Kendrith!

"If you only had an heir," pleaded Wolden. "I don't mean your ordinary by-blow, you must have hundreds but none could rule Bua after you. The yeomen wouldn't accept a base-born's judgments. They want a son by a properly wedded wife, of high enough standing to do the Bua men honor."

"Shut up!" Greenough dismissed the mate with a chopping gesture. At first he had been astonished to see husky warriors jump to his command, the moment he barked at them. Now it seemed only normal. Wolden sighed and went off, among coils and bollards and grimly silent crewmen.

Greenough braced his feet against the roll of the deck. A

gust of rain stung his cheeks. *I shouldn't have yelled at him that way, he thought. He means well. He's served me and fought for me and given me his blanket in winter lairs and taught me half of what I know. Ever since I was a boy at Bua.*

Almost, he was there again, under the birches that grew along the swift Oush. A meadow starred with daisies rippled in the wind, where horses and the tame unicorn which was the Luck of Bua cropped. On a hillcrest overlooking the sea, the rough-hewn buildings of the thorp blew smoke skyward. In other directions stretched forest and mountain, for this was one of the greatest estates in all Narr. But he had spent most of his time at the dock and in the boathouses, listening as Wolden yarned of journeys across the sea.

No! That was Kendrith! I, Carl Greenough, was born among sober brick walls in Baltimore. I attended a good school, watched many movies, and camped out with the Boy Scouts. Why do I envy Kendrith his childhood?

The broadsword at his hip was a welcome anchor to present reality. He squinted through the rain at the castle.

It was not large, but rose sheer on every side, two hundred feet of basalt precipice with murderous white surf below. The for-

treass walls were built to the very edge, further increasing that height. Above them loomed roofs and spires, gaunt against the lightning. Only at one point was there entrance. The narrow mouth of a lagoon made a gap in the cliff, protected by two skerries that formed a natural breakwater. Roches still kept numerous ships moored inside, against the day when lack of supplies must force his enemy to retreat. Though cannon were placed within the harbor to cover the mouth, it would not have been impossible for armored galleys such as Otteron possessed to force an entrance.

Except . . . a gate of thick bronze bars was set in the stone. No ship could batter that down before the cannon, firing between the bars, sank it. Erenow many had tried, and been knocked to pieces. Tabirra was as impregnable as—

Greenough continued the train of thought, grinning. Sometimes he was brought up short by a recognition of how far he had adopted Kendrith's earthy sense of humor. But mostly, these days, he took it for granted. He wondered how he could re-adapt to the relative decorum of a publisher's life. *

Well, he'd be back in a body whose reflexes were conditioned otherwise than this one's. The first several weeks he'd doubtless

have to watch himself. Thereafter, this whole world would seem as remote and dreamlike as . . . as his proper world now did.

If Kendrith, in that other body, hadn't loused everything up.

Greenough bit his lip. Ellen. How long since he'd thought about her side of this affair? Not that she knew the truth, but—

Had his final, fleeting appeal to Kendrith registered?

He hearkened back, trying to recall that instant in the time beyond time and the space beyond space where the Goddess worked. Blurred, unreal, the experience had not been anything men were ever designed to endure, or to remember. First a dreadfulness, when he slumped in his office, thinking he must have had a stroke, when his soul left his body. And then Her presence.

He could certainly remember, in essence, what She told him. (If "told" was the right word.) Infinitely pitying and infinitely ruthless, that flame of a Self ordered Carl Greenough to aid Her worshipper Oterron. She could not destroy Roches and Yamaz and their gang Herself, Her power was not physical and She must work through human tools. After the final victory, if he was still alive, Greenough should return Kendrith's body to the cave, and She would put the two men back into their rightful flesh.

That much he remembered. He

had rehearsed it a thousand times since. And he remembered the moment he opened Kendrith's blue eyes, which needed no glasses, and raised Kendrith's muscular frame off the cave floor. Even then he knew the pirate chief had visited this oracular grotto on an impulse which must have originated with its Dweller.

The white-robed priestess led forth outlawed Oterron, the true Emperor, to meet him. . . .

Oh, yes, thought Carl Greenough on the *Dragon's* pitching deck. That much was perfectly clear. But Kendrith's poor little ego had been there too, as overwhelmed as the other man's, so insignificant compared to Her that he had paid it scant heed. *You yourself will not do, Kendrith of Narr, She had said. Once out of this place, you would again be beyond My power. You would not join this war from simple love of justice; when ever did the wolf protect the lamb? Nor do you have the alien knowledge and the outworld way of thinking, which may turn the course of battle. So your part is to wait and wear the mask you are given, in that other world. I warn you, it is not like this. Your violent ways would there bring you nothing but punishment, belike death. Therefore curb yourself, wait, and hope.*

Something like that. And—

Be kind to Ellen! Greenough had cried, as the two souls were flung past each other. He didn't know if it was heard, or had made any difference.

Since then, he'd been too busy to think much about home.

Still was, as a matter of fact.

He dismissed all feelings except an animal pleasure at the thought of combat. And of getting close to Princess Fiamma, if he lived!

Slowly the squall eased off, but the sky remained overcast and the sun went down invisible. A gig from Oterron's flagship drew alongside the *Dragon* and young Count Alunar, gorgeous in red satin and plumed helmet, came aboard. He picked his way through deepening twilight, among hairy half-naked corsairs who squatted on the deck gnawing their hardtack and polishing their weapons with no regard for his rank.

"I say, old chap, a bit of a reverse, what?" he exclaimed.

"Tell me more," snorted Greenough.

Alunar stroked his shoulder-length curls with a bediamonded hand. "But what are we to do now, eh?" he asked. "I mean to say, we've got to do something. Can't lie here forever. Apart from supplies, why, that Warlock may whistle up a storm that'll jolly well sink us all. What, what, what?"

"Does his majesty have any ideas?"

"No. He sent me here to—that is to say, no, he doesn't. Unless to try building that underwater boat you talked of."

"Useless in this situation," said Greenough. "But I'm glad you're here. Saves me the trouble of sending a man to the Emperor. Because I do have a plan."

"Eh?" Alunar adjusted his monocle. "A plan? Capital! What, may I ask?"

"Stick around. I'm about to inform my men."

Wolden rolled up with a hard-bitten two score. Greenough took them into the forepeak, where no magician in bird shape was apt to be hidden. They sat on the deck, on waterbutts and powderkegs, with swords and axes to hand, pantherishly at ease. A single swinging lantern threw yellow light across a scarred brow, a bent nose, a heavy-thewed arm, then a big misshapen shadow gulped down the sight. The timbers groaned and the sea beat loudly just beyond.

"We should have better weather toward morning," said Greenough. "The waves'll be down, too. But plenty dark. We'll edge within a few hundred yards of the gate and go over the side. The ship'll proceed, so the harbor gunners won't suspect anything."

"Till they see our boats come rowing, and give us a blast o' grapeshot," said Hallfry the Red.

"They won't see us at all," said Greenough. "We're swimming."

In the silence that followed, the night noises leaped forth. "I think we can seize the guns and stand off the castle garrison, long enough to unchain the gate." Greenough continued after a while. "To be sure, we won't have any armor. Our casualties may be high. They'll be total if everything doesn't work out exactly right. So if any of you want to resign, do so right now. There'll be no hard feelings."

None stirred. "Holy Tree," breathed Vandring the Smith, "what a stunt!"

Wolden had chosen his men well.

Greenough glanced at Alunar's astounded face. "We'll need a brace of galleys standing close in, but out of sight until the gates have been captured," he said. "They should be able to tell that from the noise of fighting! Then they're to row like slaves, to help open the place up and reinforce us. Once we've secured the entrance, we can admit the rest of the fleet, land our men, and fight our way up into the castle conventionally."

Alunar's monocle dropped from his eye and bobbed at the end of its string. "My dear fel-

low! My dear old chap! You must be crazy."

"I've known that for years," grumbled Wolden.

Hallfry grinned. "All good Northlings are," he said.

Alunar fiddled with his rapier. "I really don't know if I should approve this."

"You have a better notion?" said Greenough. "Failure can't cost us much more than a few hundred men and a couple of galleys."

"True. True. When did you plan to, ah, embark?"

"Disembark, you damned land-lubber. One hour before dawn."

"Good. Capital." Alunar's hesitation ended. "We'll have the fleet alerted and all that sort of rot, well in advance. I'll even have time for a bit of tea and a nap before coming back."

"You?" Greenough was startled.

"Well, I mean to say, dash it all," said Alunar, "we Imperials can't let you chaps hog all the glory, can we? I do hold a few swimming trophies myself, don't you know."

Remembering how the count had led the cavalry charge which turned the battle of Donda, Greenough gulped and nodded.

After that he must wait. And wait. War was mostly waiting. Pfc. Carl B. Greenough, US 57460280, had found it even more miserable to wait around in

Korea than in Fort Bragg. Captain Kendrith, though, sent for a bottle of beer, relaxed on his bunk, swapped a few bawdy reminiscences with Wolden, and fell quickly asleep.

He was awakened shortly before the hour, and went forth into darkness. One hooded lantern picked out the men clustered at the schooner's rail. Like himself, they were naked except for helmets, knives belted at their waists, swords or axes slung across their backs under the shields. The air had turned mild again, but the sea still ran heavily.

Alunar wet his lips. He resembled a pure-bred warhorse, close to the breaking point until he could find release in action. Greenough felt glad that Kendrith's body was of more stolid temperament. If he bought it in this encounter, he bought it, and so what? That was the aristocratic warrior training which spoke: most useful in a world where warriors ruled. He clapped the young man's shoulder. "Have a drink," he advised.

"I d-d-did. On the flagship. A prime Catarunian vintage." The slender form relaxed a trifle. "Just like home; before Roches came to power. Why don't you come home with me after the war, when we've restored the good old days? To my estate. I'll show

you how a gentleman deserves to live. Hunting, tourneys, actors and balladeers, feasts, boozings. And the ladies, well, the whole world knows what Catarunian ladies are like, and you'll be the social lion." Alunar blew a kiss at heaven. "What say Kendrith?"

And afterward sail off with Iro to discover a new hemisphere? And eventually, rich in gold, richer in contentment, settle down to be the squire of Bua?

No! That's for Kendrith! I'm to go back and commute every day between Manhattan and Westchester, remember? My proper job is to woo authors, and ride herd on editors, and goose the sales department, and out-argue the tax collector. Occasionally I'll let myself publish a book I know is going to lose money, because it's good, and that will feel very adventurous.

Greenough spat over the side. "Let's go," he said.

He led the way down a Jacob's ladder. The water closed about him, chill and sensuous. He needed all his muscles to keep direction in the waves, which broke over his head with a roar the helmet magnified. But Kendrith's body was a superb engine.

The schooner slid past and was lost in the dark. Ahead, a deeper blackness against the sky, rose Tabirra. He heard the surf boom on its reefs. There were no stars, but a cold blue

light burned high in the air, at the topmost pinnacle of the castle. Did Yamaz hunch over his books? Or Roches scowl and twist the rings on his big fingers? Or Fiamma stand at a mirror, combing her fire-colored hair before she dressed herself to walk the parapets and mock the Emperor? Greenough struck out more vigorously.

Close up, he saw white blurs defining a channel, where the sea exploded on the guardian rocks. It was calm in between. He eased his pace, gliding with enormous caution, up to the mast-high bars across the lagoon mouth. There he stopped, hanging onto a crosspiece while he caught his breath.

The metal was cold and hard in his grasp: Salt water ran from his helmet and down his face; the cap and hair beneath were sodden. A wan light flickered from either side of the entrance, touching with red the cannon that jutted out on concrete emplacements. Beyond gleamed the broad sheet of the lagoon, where ships were scattered like blocks. The cliffs rose on all sides, the castle behind the harbor.

He looked to right and left. The others had joined him. They clung to green bronze: a glimpsed shield, a shadow in the water, a mumbled oath. Despite all contempt for danger, Greenough's heart thumped.

This is it. Here goes!

He imitated a gull's mew and slipped between the bars. At the signal, his men followed. On the other side, ledges had been built along the cliff walls. They were deserted. Greenough reached up, chinned himself high, got a knee over the edge and sprang to his feet. Swiftly he slipped the shield from his back and onto his left arm, big and round and comforting to his bareness. He drew the sword at his shoulder and padded forward.

Immediately beyond the angle of the deep gateway, shielded from the sea breezes, a small fire on a hearthstone warmed Roches' gunners. They were half a dozen, seated next to a stack of cannonballs and a powder shed. Their boots and hose, curiasses and kettle helmets, were similar to Imperial uniform. One stood up, leaning on a pike. *City scum!* thought Greenough. *They wouldn't have heard me if I'd ridden a buffalo.*

He rushed.

The pikeman saw him and yelled. Firelight glistened off eyeballs beneath the headpiece. Greenough raised his shield. The point glided off its brass facing. Before the man could club his shaft, Greenough was in under his guard. The sword rose and fell. There came the heavy sensation of metal biting flesh. Wound-

ed in the thigh, the pikeman went to his knees.

"To arms! Attack! Attack at the portal!" A trumpet brayed. Halfrey charged and beheaded the trumpeter with one swing of blade. But the harm was done.

Another sentry stood beyond the fallen pikeman. Through the gloom, Greenough saw him raise an ax. He dropped to one knee himself, holding the shield up so he could take the blow with all his shoulder. Even so, the shock numbed his arm. He heard the wooden framework crack somewhere. His broadsword chopped at the axman's nearer wrist. It wasn't there, quite. This fellow was good! Greenough bounced back to his feet and cut again. His blow was parried by the ax handle. As he crouched, looking for an opening, the wounded pikeman seized him around the legs.

He toppled. The pikeman fell on top of him and slashed at his throat with a dagger. "Nothing doing!" Greenough snarled. He pushed the boss of his shield into the man's teeth. Rolling free, he saw the ax descend where he had been. The pikeman got in its way. Kendrith's laughter barked forth. He fell on the axman anew, wounded him also, but continued to have a fight on his hands. Sparks showered where steel met steel. They circled about, smiting. Greenough took

several cuts on his bare skin, and several of his own blows were turned by the opponent's breastplate.

The cannon bulked beside him. Hardly stopping to think, he ducked around the barrel and vaulted to the top. The axman blundered past, hunting for him in the dull shadow-choked light. Greenough sprang from above, landed with both feet on the man's shoulders. He crashed to the dock. Greenough killed him.

Panting, he looked about. The fight was over, as the outnumbered gunners were cut down. One pirate was dead. On the steps which led down from the heights to the rear of the harbor, lanterns bobbed. He heard voices calling up there, trumpets, drums, a metal clangor. The garrison would arrive in moments.

"Get going!" he rapped.

Wolden and Vandring hefted their tools and disappeared into the night. Opening yonder gate would be no simple job, even with help from a galley when one arrived. It was fastened with chains heavy enough to anchor a ship, whose locks must be broken. Meanwhile the workers required protection.

"All clear over here, old chap," called Alunar merrily through the night, from the other side of the channel. "But the ruddy cannon can't be swung around to cover the shoreward approach."

"I knew that," answered Greenough. "So mine the approach." He fumbled his way into the shed, picked up a bag, and ran out again. His men labored with him. They piled the stuff some distance from the gun and returned, laying a powder train. Someone handed Greenough a brand from the fire.

"Take shelter, or lie down flat," instructed the captain. "All hell is about to let out for noon." Several men chuckled. He'd gotten quite a reputation as a wit in the last couple of years, merely by translating the clichés of his own world. He wondered, briefly and irrelevantly, if Kendrith had done likewise.

The garrison swarmed down onto the docks and hurried toward the portal. A few primitive hand guns barked. More to be feared were the crossbows, whose quills buzzed nastily past Greenough's ears. Now he could see the faint sheen of armor, as the leading squad climbed his barricade. . . . He touched the brand to the powder.

Fire spurted. A wave of it rose to the sky. Some bags flared up, others exploded. Sparks and bolts and meteors fountained from end to end of the harbor. The ground jumped beneath Greenough's belly. Thunder banged in his head. Darkness followed full of echoes and hot afterimages.

For a space only the injured

screamed. Then orders were shouted, whistles blown, a trumpet winded. The rebels reformed and advanced. They had guts, for sure! Unless it was only that they knew how little merciful the people they had squeezed and tormented would be to them.

"For the Goddess' sake," bawled Greenough, "aren't you ever going to get that obscenity lockbusted?"

A ragged line of soldiers came into view. Behind them, some of the ships which had been ignited by flying fire started to burn more brightly. They limned the walls and stark towers of the castle against night.

"Fall in," snapped Greenough. His score stood shield to shield, next the cannon, barring the way to the gate. Thus they would stand till relieved, or slain.

A big, bearded cuirassier darted at him, sword aloft. He interposed his shield. The blow rebounded, grazing the nosepiece of his helmet. He cut at the neck. The cuirassier parried. Their blades locked. For a moment, black under a lifting yellow curtain of fire, they strained muscle against muscle. Kendrith's body was stronger. The soldier's blade was forced back to his chest. Greenough made a sudden, sharp thrust. His point entered below the chin. The cuirassier gurgled blood.

As he sank, Greenough struck

at the man behind him. An ax thundered on the Northling helmet. Greenough staggered, regained his feet, scythed at the ankles of someone else. Then it was strike and ward and strike again, grunting, sweating, gasping for breath, slipping in blood, and one by one seeing his comrades die.

His shield was beaten to a rag. He threw it into a man's face and defended himself with sword alone. A blade furrowed his calf. He chopped down and struck the arms which had wielded it, but his edge was so blunted that he didn't cut deeply. Bones broke, though. Hallfrey went down at his side, a spear in his guts. The buccaneer line dissolved into a few survivors, each surrounded by a pack of enemies. A halberd smote Greenough's sword so fiercely that it was torn from his grasp.

He knocked a man down with his fist, snatched a cannonball from the pile, and threw it at a tall person in a visored helmet. The helmet crumpled. The skull beneath went too. Greenough backed up to the great gun. At least they wouldn't kill him from behind.

A fresh racket broke loose. Through the brightening firelight, the haze of smoke and clamor of destruction, he saw Otteron's men. The gate was

open and the galleys had entered. The enemy pulled away.

He sat down and wheezed.

"Here, skipper. I got this from the boat."

Greenough snatched the wine crock and drained half of it. Wolden chuckled in his gray whiskers. The mate's blacksmith hammer was splashed red. Evidently he'd waded into battle the moment the gate was unlocked. strength flowed back through Greenough. He climbed up on the gun and peered through the murk. Another Imperial ship warped into the harbor and began disgorging men. But it would take time to land the whole army, or even enough to outnumber the rebels. Meanwhile they were retreating in good order.

"If they reach the castle, they'll still have a chance of standing us off," Greenough said. "We've got to forestall that. Gather a bunch of troopers, Wolden."

He searched among the fallen around him until he found a shield to his liking. No sword looked worthwhile, but that axman who gave him so much trouble at first had wielded a lovely weapon . . . ah, here. Impulsively, Greenough closed the staring eyes. That had been a brave lad. "Thanks," he said, and went to rejoin Wolden.

The mate had assembled some thirty armored Imperials, who

gaped at their leaders' unconventional costume. "We want to cut the enemy off from the castle," Greenough told them. "We might also bag good King Roches."

"Didn't you know, skipper?" said Wolden. "That's been done."

"What?"

"That big man over there, who got his noddle bashed in with a cannonball somebody pitched. I noticed royal insignia on his breastplate, and opened the visor to make sure. I've seen him myself a few times before the war, when I came trading."

"Why . . . in that case—No. I suppose we're in as much danger while Yamaz is alive."

"And Fiamma," said a man-at-arms harshly.

"Well—uh—a woman can't succeed to the throne, so if she was safely married off, to somebody without Muntarist pretensions—" Greenough felt his countenance go hot. The fire in the harbor wasn't entirely responsible. "Come on, you sons," he growled.

They hastened over the piers, avoiding combat. The principal fight on this side was taking place near the cliff, where the rebels had rallied into formation and were beating off the Imperial attacks as they moved slowly toward the stairs. On Greenough's right, the lagoon was a cauldron, bellowing and reeking, its flames

as high as the castle walls. Heat gusted around him. Still another ship negotiated the gateway and started landing men.

Greenough put foot on rock-hewn treads. Smoke stung his eyes. Halfway up, it was so thick he must grope through red-shot murk. But the air at the clifftop was clear. He looked across a sea gleaming like mercury in the first false dawnlight. Had the battle lasted that long? Or, rather, only that long?

The iron door at the head of the staircase was open. A squad of sentries challenged the approaching men. "For the House of Muntar," Greenough yelled back. Not the rebel password, surely, but their slogan—and what with the similarity of equipment, and the general confusion—The door was not closed in his face. He fell upon the squad with his troop and cut them to pieces.

Beyond, a wide, paved court reached to the far side of the island. Part of it was covered by gardens, part by lesser buildings. Mountainous in the center rose the donjon keep. Smoke and fog streamers drifted across emptiness, under the graying sky. "Stay here," Greenough commanded. "Shut the gate against the enemy. They won't have a chance to ram it down, with our forces at their backs. I'm going to the entrance on the other side."

The flagstones were cool and wet with dew under his feet. The threshing of battle seemed very distant. Until he rounded a buttress and saw the twin gate, where men struck each other. So someone else had had the same idea! Greenough ran to help.

A clear, happy voice soared above the cursing and clashing. Alunar. Good to know he was alive. As Greenough approached, the count broke through the defending line and crossed swords with a guard.

A blackness glided down above them. For one second, Greenough thought wildly about clouds . . . nothing else could be so huge. . . . He saw wings and beak and talons. The condor snatched at Alunar's head.

Greenough hurled his ax.

The bird shrieked as it fell. The enemy guardsman stared, threw down his sword, and ran. Alunar sprang to skewer the condor. A wing knocked him rolling. Then the black bird shuddered, once, and became an old dead man.

Greenough helped Alunar rise. "Whoof!" said the noble. "A rum go, what? Blasted thing would've had my eyes in another tick. Much thanks, old chap."

"Yamaz?" asked Greenough.

Alunar nodded. "Quite. Nice work."

"And Roches is dead. I think we've won."

"True. Take an hour or so yet to convince the jolly old opposition." Alunar withdrew his rapier from the carcass, but its point was corroded off. He flung the weapon aside. There was no need for it anyway. Shaken, the sentries had fled down the stairs. His own men warded the door.

"Any other holdouts up here?" wondered Greenough.

"Doesn't seem so." Alunar swept the utter stillness of the castle with a monocled glance.

"Let's check. The boys won't need our help to maintain these gates."

As he swung across the courtyard with his friend, Greenough felt his heartbeat accelerate. By the time he had entered the high main archway of the keep, his blood was brawling.

Victory! A whole empire ready to embrace and reward the Northling who had liberated her. Afterward, a world to wander, and the dear green hills of Bua, and—

No, what was he thinking? He could go home to Ellen now. That was all he was thinking. Nothing more. The grotto of the Goddess lay a few days' sail from here. He could be himself, Carl Greenough, in his own proper body and his own proper house, within the week.

The castle chambers were magnificent with tapestry and beaten

gold. What a place to loot! Slaves bent low to the conquerors, bloodstained, bristle-chinned, clad in helmets and smoke smudges. "Where's Princess Fiamma?" Alunar inquired. "We'd best make sure of her, don't you know. Potential troublemaker, yes, rather."

"Especially with her father to avenge," nodded Greenough. His quick, irrational sadness jumped over to joy when Alunar replied:

"Oh, that doesn't matter. It's been notorious for years, she couldn't stand him. He murdered her mother, you see, in one of his drunken rages. But because of pride and all that sort of rot, she stayed by him as Princess of the Empire. Even now, I wa-

ger, she won't swear fealty to Oterron; or she'll break whatever oath she does give at the first opportunity. There are still plenty of Muntarists around. If she married one of 'em—" Alunar sighed. "At the same time, one rather hates to decapitate her. Ungallant, what?"

A shaking eunuch conducted them to the gynaeceum. Its door was locked. Greenough rapped with his ax. "Open up in there!" he called.

"Open to a barbarian?" answered a voice which was ice and music. "I'll see you in Ginnungagap first!"

With Kendrith's blunt practicality, Greenough struck the lock

a few shrewd ax blows. It burst. He entered.

A vase whizzed through the air and shattered on his helmet. Her maidservants screamed and fled through the dawnlit rooms beyond, but Fiamma sprang at Greenough with a knife.

He barely ducked the blow. She hissed and tried again. He caught her arm and yanked the dagger free. As it tinkled to the floor, she cursed him and tried to claw his eyes. He closed one big hand around both her wrists, clasping them firmly behind her back. Her thin robe got torn in the process, but he didn't mind. With his other arm he pulled her close.

Never had he imagined so much beauty.

It was as if someone else spoke with his voice, arrogant and desirous: "Your cause is finished. I, Kendrith, broke you. Now I've come for my booty."

"You filthy savage!" She bit him. He cuffed her.

Laughing, he picked her up. She struggled like a lynx, but he was so much stronger that he merely enjoyed it. "Let's talk this over in private," he said, and carried her into the next room.

Alunar raised his brows, clicked his tongue, and settled down to wait.

Much later, when Oterron's men swarmed triumphant

through the castle, Greenough emerged. Fiamma walked beside him, leaning on his arm. Now and then she rubbed her tousled red head against his shoulder, or nuzzled his cheek. "Tell me more about Narr," she purred. "I can't wait to get there."

"I can," he said. "We'll take the *Dragon* and cruise along the Chabarro, visit Alunar, take a long vacation. How I need one!"

Her lashes fluttered downward. "As my lord wishes. What do you plan beyond that . . . for us?"

He didn't answer.

But surely the Goddess wouldn't mind if he took a month with Fiamma. Only one little month.

He stood in too much awe of Her not to return then. But his unaided sense of duty would never have drawn him back.

Back to being Carl Greenough.

The little man finished his drink and looked at his watch. "Where can Ellen have got to?" he fussed. "She was supposed to have been here half an hour ago."

"You know what women are like," I smiled.

"Not in that other world," he said with a touch of wistfulness.

"You're certainly made the place sound like an adolescent's paradise."

"Really? I didn't mean to. In talking about it, naturally I dwelt on the more colorful as-

pects. There was also the usual quota of everyday problems and everyday frustrations. Of course."

"Then why didn't you want to return home?"

"I'd been another man for so long. Can't you see? I told you several times, the body and the mind are indivisible. I'd thought with his brains, wrestled with his problems, played with his friends, wondered what lay beyond his horizons, for two years. I'd become him. Far more, toward the end, than I remained my old self."

He gazed into his empty glass. "It makes me wonder what the self is," he mused. "What's the basic thing we call 'I'? Not a bundle of personality traits. You're nothing like the person you were twenty years ago; yet both have been you. Isn't your ego, your inmost identity, isn't it precisely the continuity of experience? The evolution itself, from phase to phase of life?"

I wasn't interested in half-baked philosophy, and told him so. "Once you'd made the transition," I said, "you'd soon grow to prefer your original body again. Wouldn't you?"

"Well, no." He frowned in somewhat alcoholic thought. "I don't believe so. I'd always miss what I'd had in those two years—a freshness, a glamor, a sense of accomplishing something im-

portant and meaningful instead of playing with uninteresting toys. And my wife, the new one I'd gained. I loved her, you can't imagine how I loved her. When I felt the Goddess wrench my mind free, it was worse than dying. May I never have such a moment again."

His distress was so plain that I wondered, with a chill along my spine, if he really had been telling me a fable for our mutual amusement. Perhaps he believed it! Though he didn't act like a man with delusions.

"How I cursed Greenough and his damned sense of duty," he muttered. "I did so in Her very presence. When our egos met, and merged, and scanned each other's memories of the last two years, I told him what a dreary fool he was."

"At least you—Hey! Greenough, did you say?" I gaped across the table.

He looked surprised too, then recovered his poise. "Why, sure," he said. "I didn't mean to admit it, but there's no reason why I shouldn't. If you think back, you'll note I never claimed otherwise. Who do you suppose I'd be?"

"Look, for two years I'd been here, among towers as high as mountains, served by machines more powerful than magic, the most fabulous parts of the world no further away than a few days' flying. Flying!" His eyes glittered behind their lenses. "No famines, no pestilences, no

smoky chimneys, no plodding sailships and springless wagons, no surly slaves, no ignorant barbarians, no unwashed hussies or damned would-be queens, half cat—the sweetest, loyallest women ever created, all to myself! And I could relax, didn't have to take a spear along everytime I went out for a breath of air. And my IQ must have been thirty points higher, with all that that means in the way of awareness. And I'd applied some notions of my own world to the publishing business and had just really got them going good. In another five years I'd be running rings around my competitors. Judas priest!" he burst out. "Did you think I wanted to return?"

I sat still for a while. The bar clattered around us, filling up with the cocktail hour crowd. "So you didn't?" I asked gently.

He smiled. "No. The Goddess laughed and put us both where we desired. I'll always remember Her laughter."

He twisted around in his seat. An ordinary-looking woman had come through the door, her arms full of packages. "Ah, there's Ellen," he said, rising. "Will you join us for a drink?"

I got up also. Plain to see, his invitation was from politeness only. He was starting to regret his lubricated tongue. In any case, he had eyes for none but the woman.

"No, thanks," I said. "I've had enough."

Varden was a dictator, Kane was an idiot, and Ballerd was a louse. At least, that was the way it looked before somebody sent for the . . .

FIREMAN

By J. F. BONE

ILLUSTRATED by VARGA

THE last witness had been excused. Prosecution and Defense had made their closing arguments. And in the cold gray juror room in Varden City Ernst Ballerd sat alone thoughtfully staring into the double bank of lenses that would transmit his image and his decision to viewscreens of the world. Responsibility weighed heavily upon his stocky frame seated uncomfortably erect in the big chair, spatulate fingers tense against the padded arms. His face was drawn into hard lines, lips a thin slash above square stubborn jaw, blue eyes cold and emotionless beneath thick brows and a stiff brush of yellow hair that glittered metallically in the shadowless light.

"Not so stern, Juror Bal-

lerd," the prompter box advised softly. "Relax. Act human. You're supposed to be a juror—not a robot."

Obediently Ballerd loosened his muscles.

"That's better," the box said. "Now, sir, are you ready?"

Ballerd nodded.

The lenses in front of him glowed faintly; he was on the air.

"You have heard the evidence, Juror Ballerd," Jarl Varden's voice came from the speaker. "Are you ready to give your decision?"

"I am, sir," Ballerd said.

"Very well, Juror. Let justice be done."

Ballerd hesitated. The decision must satisfy Varden, yet give an impression of justice. A tough proposition any way

one looked at it. He shrugged microscopically. "Guilty," Ballerd said.

"Your recommendation, Juror?"

"Minimal erasure."

Varden's voice was with him again. "Thank you, Juror Ballerd, for your service to the Union." The speaker clicked with metallic finality.

It was over.

Ballerd sighed and rose from the chair. It was all over. Now came the tense period. He'd made his gambit. Now it was Varden's move. He walked slowly toward the door, limping a little from the old wound he'd received during the Revolution.

The door was half open when Varden's voice came from behind him. "One moment, Brother Ballerd," it said.

The wave of relief was pure pain. "Yes, sir," Ballerd said, "what do you wish?" With some satisfaction he noted that his voice was completely under control.

"You conducted yourself well, Ballerd," Varden's voice came from behind him. "With dignity. Very impressive. Very impressive, indeed. My congratulations. It was a job well-done."

"Thank you, sir," Ballerd

turned slowly. The room was empty.

"I was bothered, however." Varden's voice came from the speaker set in the wall above the desk. "The evidence was overwhelming—yet you did not recommend liquidation. Why?"

Ballerd kept his face expressionless. Varden could be observing him, even though he could not see Varden.

"The evidence was *too* overwhelming," he said. "The Union overstated its case. Several times the defense could have introduced doubt, but they failed to do so. The entire proceedings had a bad odor. It looked as though Security had muzzled the witnesses to make the case airtight. Now that's just fine for a computer—the more convincing the guilt, the more certain the verdict."

Varden sounded amused. "I told Suzuke he was overdoing it. But the man won't listen."

"I was selected as Juror to apply the human factor to the law," Ballerd went on. "And this I did. The question of Annalee Kane's guilt was of minor significance. The important thing was that one human being was sitting in judgment on another. As a result any decision I made had to be tempered with humanity.

I could not behave as a computer. Yet in the end, the result is the same. Annalee Kane is effectively eliminated."

"Excellent!" Varden said. "You interest me. Your I.D. and Sector, please."

"Ernst Ballerd, Serial EB 61437 V, Arkady Sector, Vishnu," he said. He hoped the triumph in his mind was not echoed in his voice. The delicate maneuvering to get the Juror assignment had been worth every minute of time and every credit of money he had spent.

"Thank you. Call at my office tomorrow at ten. I think you will find it interesting. Considering your efforts you deserve a suitable reward."

Ballerd was still wondering whether there was cynicism or sincerity in Varden's voice as he left the Jury Room and walked down the corridor to the rotunda just inside the main entrance. Annalee Kane was still there, sitting in her glassite cage. He had passed her every day for the past week—on public display before the curious crowds who came to see the traitor. It was a barbaric touch, hardly worthy of a civilized state. She was still there, but the spectators were gone, and in their place a ring of recorders stared with glassy lenses.

Two white-coated technicians watched the machines, occasionally lifting their eyes to the slim figure behind the transparent panels.

The implications were obvious. Hers was to be a public Judgment. His eyes widened as he saw a swift flash of fear cross her long, ugly face as force rods tightened around her pinning her immovably in the exact center of the cage. There was a terrible allegory in her straining rigidity, the personification of the helplessness of the individual against the power of the state. He stood fascinated and repelled by the rigid tableau as a silver hemisphere descended from the domed ceiling of the cage to cover her motionless head. He winced as a brief shimmer flickered over the surface of the inverted bowl.

The hemisphere rose and Ballerd's stomach churned with nausea. For the face of Annalee—the gaunt-cheeked, hard-lipped face of unattractive efficiency was gone, and in its place was a vacant mask of drooling idiocy. A thin strand of saliva ran from one corner of her loose-lipped mouth as her opaque eyes stared fixedly into space. A viewer was no substitute for the real thing, Ballerd

thought, as the technicians collected their equipment and the glassite cage sank into the floor carrying the idiot hulk of what had been the most powerful woman in the Union. A circle of flooring rose to take the cage's place. The technicians trundled their scanners off to waiting trucks. Everything was wiped clean. The rotunda was as bare and spotless as though Annalee had never been there. He felt a twinge of pity for the smashed woman. Not that it made any difference. She was through and he was rising. He shrugged. That's the way it went. Someone went out—someone else came along to take his place. And life went on. He turned slowly toward the entrance and walked heavily out into the yellow sunlight.

In a dark suit, sitting behind the black expanse of polished desk, Jarl Varden looked exactly like what he was, a ruthless, intelligent dictator who had established the Union as the government of Vishnu and placed himself at its head. In the entire Confederation there were few who could match his absolute authority and none who could match his ambition. The man was a ruler. Power radiated from him in palpable waves.

Ballard eyed him curiously—without envy.

Varden looked up and smiled, a perfunctory twitch of lips with no warmth of eyes above them.

"You're on time," he said. "The sign of an efficient mind."

The platitude grated. "Thank you, Coordinator. It is a habit of mine to be prompt," Ballard said without returning the smile. "And now, sir, let us get down to business."

The abrupt, almost insulting, approach startled Varden. He looked quizzically at the stocky man facing him. Ballard's soft exterior was deceptive.

"As you know, Brother Ballard," Varden said coldly, "the outcome of yesterday's trial left an opening on my staff."

"I was aware of that, sir."

"Your conduct throughout this case impressed me favorably. I feel that you might be induced to do staff work."

"I have a good job," Ballard said. "It's not confining and it pays well."

"But it is not the best," Varden said. "A Juror has limitations. I can offer you freedom from those limitations."

"I'm interested," Ballard said tonelessly.

"Of course you realize that you have a bad record," Varden said.

Ballerd nodded. "You could call it that. I fought you, true enough. But your crowd was not the government then. You were revolutionaries."

"And you'd support us now?"

"Of course. Personal feelings have nothing to do with my duty as a citizen. I swore to uphold the legal government, and you are the legal government of Vishnu."

Varden smiled. "Hmm. Different circumstances—different behavior—eh? A neat sophistry providing you are telling the truth."

"I lie only when necessary, sir."

"And you don't think it's necessary now?"

Ballerd nodded. "Now it would be foolish. You could check too easily."

"But could I trust you?"

"As much as you could trust anyone. More than most, I think." Ballerd's voice held exactly the right overtones.

"That we shall see," Varden said.

"That is your privilege, sir. I am at your disposal."

"You are too good to be true," Varden said with cynical accent. "The perfect sub-

ordinate. It hardly fits with what I know about you."

"Don't misconstrue me," Ballerd said evenly. "I am ambitious. I want to get ahead. I enjoy power. As a matter of fact I felt that the Annalee Kane case was my opportunity. I pulled every trick I knew to get that assignment because I was certain you'd monitor the trial and I wanted to impress you. I felt that it was worthwhile because if I succeeded I'd get preference over other power-seekers. My actions were designed deliberately to attract your attention."

Varden smiled ruefully. "They did," he said, "and they leave me with a problem. You are too clever to leave outside the government and maybe too dangerous to take in. Perhaps the simplest solution would be to liquidate you."

Ballerd said nothing, but he could feel his palms grow moist with sweat. Varden was perfectly capable of liquidating him if he decided that there was too much danger in Ballerd's existence.

"I'd like to know whether you're sincere or merely being clever," Varden went on.

"You have the equipment to find out," Ballerd said equably, "but I can save you trouble. I'm a little of both."

"Then why didn't you take over the police division before we took power? It wouldn't have been too hard. Marriner wasn't a brilliant man, and your dossier shows you were."

Ballerd shook his head. "Loyalty," he said. "Besides, he helped me get on the force."

"And you had no desire for his position?"

"Certainly, but it wasn't that important. I had the power. That was enough. I didn't need the title."

"You realize, of course, that you caused the Union a great deal of trouble. If we had known your part in it you would have probably ended up with your chief instead of getting that job as a petty Juror."

Ballerd chuckled. "There you have my reason for not wanting obvious power. A man is too exposed. As it was, Marriner had the responsibility. He made the decision to resist. It wasn't mine even though I approved of it. Possibly he wasn't too bright, but he was honest, loyal and courageous. He fought for his beliefs."

"And you were wounded—and lost your job—and had to work as a menial. Was it worth it?"

Ballerd shook his head. "No," he admitted, "it wasn't.

But that's the trouble with loyalty. You're stuck with the situation until circumstances change. I couldn't doublecross Marriner even though I knew the old government would lose. But he's dead now and the Union is in power. I can make new loyalties."

"Personal or political?" Varden asked.

"Both," Ballerd said flatly.

"Marriner and I were friends in the early days," Varden said musingly. "Like myself, he had the capacity for inspiring loyalty. It was too bad he was so pigheaded about the Union. But enough of this. I asked you here for a purpose and we are wasting time. I've checked on you. You wouldn't be here if the results weren't favorable. You know that."

Ballerd nodded.

"I'm offering you a job," Varden said. "No—not a job," he corrected himself. "*The* job—Annalee Kane's job. Would you like to head Manpower Procurement and Allocation? Would you be willing to take the job of the woman you condemned?"

"Why not." Ballerd's face was impassive.

Varden touched a button on his desk, and two Security agents came into the room.

Ballerd recognized them from their attitude—a couple of Suzuke's specials. Trained to the hilt—emotionless as machines. Without batting an eye, they would kill him where he stood if Varden gave the word. The pair eyed him with a remote professional look.

"Take this man down to Interrogation for a Class One checkup," Varden said. He looked at Ballerd. "If you survive, you've passed the first hurdle. Otherwise . . ." he let the sentence dangle suggestively.

"I understood the conditions before I accepted the offer," Ballerd said woodenly.

"I know that," Varden said. "Frankly, Ballerd, I don't know whether I shall be glad or sorry if I see you in this office tomorrow, but good luck."

Ballerd grinned at him. "You'll see me all right, sir," he prophesied.

The basic trouble with the Union, Ballerd reflected, was that its officials believed their techniques were infallible. In a first class civilization this could be dangerous. In a second class one it could be fatal. And Vishnu wasn't first class. It never had been. Their technology was good, nearly the equal of worlds like Fanar and

Terranova, but vastly inferior to that of Lyrane or Terra. And Union knowledge of biology and psychodynamics was positively primitive. And their police work was crude even when compared with Marriner's old division. They did not know the rudiments of turning a man inside out mentally. Nor did they have the slightest knowledge of dampers. Ballerd grinned thinly. How could they—the gadget was organic and structurally indistinguishable from normal brain tissue. He shrugged. What Varden didn't know wouldn't hurt him—yet. His profile was clean, and agreed with what he had told Varden. He was ambitious and intelligent, but essentially a subordinate personality. And his checkup was generally clean. He was tailored to Varden's specifications—and designed for the dictator's destruction. Marriner would be avenged even though he had never known him.

On the following morning, true to his promise, Ballerd looked at Varden across the polished desk.

Varden smiled, a humorless grimace neither friendly nor unfriendly. "Well, Ballerd, you appear to be in remarkably good shape. Clear conscience, eh?"

"Politically at any rate," Ballerd admitted.

"That's the only way to be. Now I suppose you're interested in my decision."

Ballerd nodded. "I'm anticipating it," he said bluntly. "When do I start?"

Varden smiled. "Confident, aren't you?" he asked. "But you're right. I can use you. A man of your talents is wasted as a Juror. Your headquarters are three floors down. You can take over at once." Varden stared at him somberly. "A word of advice. Don't axe too many. Good people are hard to replace."

"I won't, sir. I don't work that way."

"That's good." Varden smiled drily. "My principal worry was that you might be that ancient virtuous cliché—a new broom."

It didn't take Ballerd long to realize that Annalee Kane had built a good organization. Surprisingly good, considering what had been said about her at the trial. And, incidentally, the shadow of that trial and his part in it hung over Manpower like a pall, but that could be straightened out. What couldn't be straightened out was that Annalee had run major policy on a personal basis. If there were any pri-

vate files, he couldn't locate them. What he needed was Annalee's memory, and that he wasn't going to get. Erasure wiped out the consciousness. He frowned. But what about the subconscious—the buried memories—the hidden drives. He pulled thoughtfully at an earlobe as he considered the possibilities. Then he called Vishnu Research Center. After that he phoned Varden.

The Coordinator's hurried voice snapped at him. "I'm busy. Call back later."

"Sorry, sir, this is important."

"Very well, I'll give you three minutes."

"That will be more than enough," Ballerd said. "I want to requisition Annalee Kane."

"You *What?*"

Ballerd repeated and listened as the phone made noises in his ear. "Yes, sir," he said. "I know what I'm doing. . . . No, sir, I want her I want her memories. She ran this office out of her head. . . . No—I'm not sure if they're available. Research Center doesn't think so. But I'd like to try. If they weren't cooked out entirely, hypno may bring them out. . . . Sure, I know erasure leaves a blank mind—but that could be surface memories. No one's ever really checked and if she's still useful, I'd like to use

her. . . . No, sir—I've no intention of putting her on the staff. I'm merely interested in what can be wrung out of her. I'd like any help I can get until I get this section straightened out. You can have her back once I'm through. . . . No, I suppose not; she isn't worth too much anyway." Ballerd echoed the chuckle that erupted from the receiver. "But I'd like your approval before I go on with this . . ." Ballerd continued, ". . . You do? . . . You will? . . . Fine. That will be excellent and thank you, sir." Ballerd looked at his watch. Two minutes forty-three seconds—and he had what he wanted. He grinned. Sometimes the direct approach was ten times as effective as pussy-footing.

He picked up the phone again and called Security personnel section, starting the machinery that would get him what he wanted. The thought of the discomfort he was about to cause Annalee never entered his head. She had information he needed, and he was going to get it if it was humanly possible. That was all.

Mental erasure was just what the name implied. The brain of the victim was unimpaired, but it was supposedly wiped clean. The first dose

eliminated the more recent memories, roughly about twenty years of them. Speech and most of the conditioned reflexes were seldom affected, which made minimal erasure hardly worse than a case of amnesia once the primary shock passed. The only difference was that memory in an erased person had never been restored. Successive treatments, however, reduced the victim to a mindless lump of flesh that maintained only the minimal reflexes necessary for life. The limit was three. Beyond that the victim died. Ballerd hoped that Security, which was responsible for administering judgment, hadn't gotten enthusiastic and decided that if one dose was adjudged, three would be better. There would be no chance if she had received more than a single dose.

It didn't take too long to find Annalee's location. She had been sent to Rehabilitation Camp Number Twelve. Ballerd sighed. Numbers One through Ten were for the two and three dose treatments, the insane, the degenerates, the psychopaths, and a few whom the Central Committee figured were too dangerous to retain any segment of their personality, yet were too valuable to execute. Marriner was there—

being reeducated into a conforming Unionist, as were most of the other bigwigs of the Old Government who had escaped the wave of executions that followed the Union's success. Ballerd shrugged. There was nothing he wanted from those. His business was with Annalee.

Camp Twelve was a pleasant enough place, located close to the equator. Except for the electronic fence and force dome surrounding the cluster of buildings, it looked like the military post it had once been. Ballerd's helicopter came down on the stage on top of the administration building and the force field formed above it with a sharp, crackling noise as the technicians who had lowered it in response to the IFF signal from the 'copter restored the cover that could keep out virtually anything except fourth order radiation. Small particles and air could seep through the complex lattice-work of electromagnetic force; but any substance larger than a grain of sand was violently repelled, or caught between different forces in the lattice and literally torn apart.

A pair of Security troopers saluted as he descended from the craft, and escorted him to

the Camp Superintendent's office.

"Glad to meet you, Brother Ballerd," the Superintendent said. "I'm Miles Graham, in charge of this station."

Ballerd smiled and shook Graham's outstretched hand.

"And what can I do for you, Brother Ballerd?" Graham said.

"You have an inmate here, a woman called Annalee Kane. I want her."

"You have the authority, I suppose. You know, of course, that I cannot release an inmate without Security approval—not even to a member of the Central Committee."

"Will this do?" Ballerd said, producing Varden's authorization.

Graham's eyes widened. His narrow face tightened as he looked at Ballerd. "Naturally," he said, "but we'll have to check."

"Absolutely. You would be negligent if you did not."

Graham relaxed. He touched a button on his desk and handed the authorization to a secretary who soft-footed into the room. "Check this," he said, and turned back to Ballerd. "I'll have to have more than the inmate's old name if you wish to find her. There are nearly three hundred

women in this camp, and we have no idea what their names were before they came here. Fact is, if it weren't for their ID numbers we wouldn't be able to tell one from another. You see, when we get them they have already gone through basic processing."

"What is that?"

Graham grinned. "You've never seen an inmate, have you?"

"No."

"Well, after judgment they are sent to one of the Research Medical Centers. Here they are processed for our camps while they're still in primary shock. They get a new face, and are plastiformed into one of ten basic types."

"Eh?"

"It's a new process. Essentially it is simple. By changing the shape of the bone structure by electrophoretic translocation of calcium and protein, and altering the location of subcutaneous fat deposits, an individual can be literally remade. They call it plastiforming. The process is still experimental and there is an occasional failure. But on the whole it works very well. However, the plastiform matrices are complicated and the changes cannot be too great, and so there are ten basic types of male and female bod-

ies which conform to the population mean." Graham grinned. "We can't do anything with six footers or midgets but, as for the rest—well—maybe I should show you."

He touched a stud on his desk and a wall screen filling one side of the room flickered into life. It showed the face of a building which flicked off and was replaced by a downward angle view of a grassy yard. About a hundred inmates were performing a rhythmic series of calisthenics under the watchful eyes of a dozen female guards dressed in short blue smocks. The guards kept them well in line.

Ballard gasped! Not because the inmates were naked, for nudity was common enough on Vishnu's beaches, but because everyone was precisely the same as the next. The scanner picture swept down on the group as Graham spoke into a microphone. "Suspend exercise", he said. "Prepare for inspection." He opened the microphone switch and smiled at Ballard. "We do this occasionally just to let them know we're checking on them. The guards, you see, are merely inmates whose profiles show capacity for leadership. If we didn't show them our

fist occasionally they might get ideas."

Ballerd kept looking at the screen. The two lines of naked bodies were drawn to rigid attention, and in front of them the ten guards stood in a rigid line. The scanner swept down and the picture moved slowly down the line past rigid body after identical body, face after identical face under its neat crown of hair drawn smoothly back to a knot at the back of the head. Outside of slight variations in the color of the eyes, and the color and length of their hair, the women were identical—except for a small blue number tattooed on their left hip.

The guards, equally motionless, stood with their hands grasping the hems of their uniform which they drew upward and forward to expose hip and thigh and show their tattooed numbers.

"Inspection completed," Graham said into the microphone. "Resume." He watched as the double line and the blue smocked guards again swung into motion. Then he turned off the screen.

"Good heavens!" the exclamation jumped involuntarily from Ballerd's lips. "No wonder you need more than a name!"

"They're all Type Two here—height five feet eight inches, asthenic. You see they are graded and encamped by physical type. Keeps things uniform and simplifies physical facilities and supply."

"Efficient," Ballerd said, "but which one is Annalee?"

The secretary reappeared, and Ballerd noted without surprise that she was another inmate. "The authorization is genuine, sir," she said.

"Fine," said Graham. "Now to find your party. Do you have any more data?"

"A Security dossier and fingerprint facsimiles," Ballerd said. "Are those enough?"

"Plenty—the fingerprints are not changed. Give me the card."

Ballerd passed it over and Graham handed it to the secretary. "Have this inmate report to me at once."

"Yes, sir."

"You'll find that she has no true memory of any events of the past after her tenth or twelfth year," he said. "Otherwise she's normal. Of course, she has memories filling in the gap, but they're synthetic—given at the Research Center. You'll find that she remembers living through the crash of '98 and being sold to a labor contractor by her starving parents and was worked as a

field hand until she nearly died, and was rescued from incineration by the Revolutionaries. This, and a long time in the hospital before she came here, is part of her memory rehabilitation. She may or may not be grateful, but she will be obedient. That I'll guarantee. The mental set she has acquired makes that much mandatory. I can't speak for her education up to the last true year she remembers, but from there on until she arrived here it is nil."

"Hmm. Not bad. You reeducate them and they're turned back into society. But how do you explain their identical appearance?"

"That was done by the labor contractors — the beasts!" Graham said with a grin. "We try to teach them to forget it, and distribute them widely enough after retraining to keep them pretty well apart. It works. The girls don't like this uniformity and tend to keep away from each other."

Ballard chuckled. "Like wearing the same hat?"

"Exactly."

"You lads don't miss a bet, do you?"

"Frankly, sir, we can't afford to. With manpower on our necks and a whole new order to create, we simply can't waste a thing. I hope you

have good use for this inmate."

"Don't worry. If I can't get what I want from her, I'll give her back to you. If I can, it'll be good use."

The secretary came back followed by a guard and an inmate, and laid two cards on Graham's desk.

"Number 14027 reporting as ordered," the guard said.

"You may return to your unit," Graham answered.

"Thank you, sir. Glory to the Union."

"Glory to the Union," Graham replied.

"Your name is?" Ballard asked the woman.

"I'm sorry, sir, it is not allowed." She looked at him and a slow wave of color swept across her face and neck. The nipples of her breasts tightened and a delicate muscle tremor swept across her stomach and thighs.

"But it is now," Graham said, and to Ballard, "Don't worry, sir. This is a normal reaction. Plastiforming apparently has some other effects besides altering shape. That's why we have separate camps for the sexes.

"Annalee—Annalee Kane—I think," she said slowly. It's been twenty years since I used that name—before they

brought me and gave me this number and put me to work picking taref buds. But I think it's Annalee—I'm sure it is." Her body quivered and her breath came faster.

"Her prints check," Graham said, looking up from the cards.

"That's enough," said Ballerd. "Get her some clothes, and I'll be off. And thank you for your help."

"Don't mention it," Graham said easily. "Anything for Brother Varden."

"I'll mention it when I see him," Ballerd said.

"Am I to go with you, sir?" Annalee asked.

"Yes," Ballerd said. "I'm taking charge of you."

"That will be nice," she murmured and then pressed her lips tightly together. An expression of blended eagerness and revulsion crossed her face.

What had happened to Annalee was all to the good physically. They had cut an inch off her height, and her new face was far more attractive than the old. The leanness of her body was replaced with adequate, almost opulent, curves that were visible even through the shapeless smock covering her body. All in all she was considerably more attractive

as a woman. A neat dish. But that wasn't her sole interest to Ballerd. It would remain after he had explored behind the facade, but right now he was more interested in what she knew rather than how she felt.

She sat quietly beside him as they sped back toward Varden City, her eyes flat and introspective. Suddenly she spoke. "Thanks for lifting me out of that hole, Ernst, I probably could have done the stretch all right. Might have made head guard in a few months, but I never could have gotten out soon enough. I would have gone crazy in there. This body they gave me has something wrong with its glands. I keep thinking about men. Perhaps it is because I wasn't erased like the others. But some of the others had it almost as bad as I.

Ballerd froze.

"Oh don't get so excited, Ernst. I recognized you almost immediately. Tissuemold can change you even better than plastiform. It can give you an artificial limp. But it can't change the color of your eyes or hide an iris mark. You have two little brown flecks like tiny leaves on your right iris. I noted them in school in our tactics short course, and when I found out I couldn't handle

this fire I sent for you. I'd know you anywhere."

Ballerd felt numbness creep up his legs. "All right, so you're a fireman—I hope. But you'd have to be or that brain-burn would have wiped you clean, superficially at least. You have a damper. And so far that's exclusive Bureau property."

She nodded. "You would have known eventually," she said, "but your conditioning and the circumstances made it sooner rather than later. You *had* to protect me, you know. And you *had* to jerk me out if you could. I assumed, of course, that you'd pick a prototype who could be of help. But I was really surprised when I found you among the Jurors.

"But why—?"

"I was no real use. Although my prototype was a strong Unionist, Varden has no faith in women. He'd have sacked me sooner or later. I couldn't reach him. So you had to take my place. That's why I let myself get rapped on that malfeasance charge. Didn't you think it was pretty obvious?"

"Yes, in a sense, but I thought you were a stupid amateur who got caught. You camouflaged perfectly."

Annalee nodded, smiling.

"But how did you know I'd

only order erasure—and for that matter, how did you know I'd be a Juror?"

"The first part of that question is easy. It was the only logical solution. You were conditioned against doing me harm and you knew, subconsciously, I had a damper. As for the second, you were on the jury list and it was the logical way to draw Varden's attention. If you hadn't managed to make the grade, I would have defended myself, and I had a perfectly good defense. In fact, it was good enough to put Suzuke in a pickle. But you would have been replaced. If you couldn't have taken advantage of the opportunity, you wouldn't have been right for this job. By the same token I couldn't help you. You had to handle this alone. Varden would have no confidence in a man who had to lean on someone else to get the job done. You had to get his confidence. Incidentally, you haven't done so well there. By now you should be working out of manpower. What's the matter?"

"What did you do with your files?"

"You mean to tell me you couldn't figure out a blind filing system? Skip every three-files, inserts, sentences, words.

They're numbered serially by accessions. Good heaven's, man, that's the simplest method in the Galaxy!"

"I didn't expect it," Ballerd muttered. "And, besides, Varden's pushing. He's got some fat scheme up his sleeve to get more manpower. That's one commodity in short supply here."

She nodded. "It has been in short supply for me, too. Especially recently," she said.

"Get your mind down to earth," Ballerd said. "You've made it easier than I expected, but you've left me a problem. What am I to do with you? I was planning to psych you, but that's unnecessary now."

"I have a suggestion about what you can do," Annalee said. "You go ahead as you've planned. I won't crack. And when you've finally established to their satisfaction that I know nothing, perhaps you can find a place for me."

Ballerd chuckled. "That's a good idea. If it works we can work together on this case. You'll apparently be a mess when I'm through with you and no sort of material for rehabilitation. I'm sure I can keep you on my personal staff as a housekeeper or something like that. I think Varden'll be agreeable if it comes to a question." He grinned and then

broke off abruptly as his wristwatch buzzed and the stressed crystal of the dial turned a faint yellow. Someone below had turned a scanner on them. Ballerd silently thanked the forethought of the Bureau which had provided this detector as part of his equipment.

Annalee's face which had begun to glow suddenly turned wooden. Ballerd's became flinty and impassive, as they sat quietly. They could do nothing else. Not with a probe on them. Security was investigating incoming aircraft for some reason known only to Varden and Suzuke.

Presently the buzzing stopped. "No more talk", Ballerd said. "Play it straight from now on."

She nodded imperceptibly.

His wristwatch buzzed again as he dropped his hand on his wrist and pressed the cutoff stud.

Despite the fact that the Union controlled everything on Vishnu, getting adequate labor at the proper place at the proper time was a job that would tax the patience of a saint. There was perpetually too much to do, and too little with which to do it. Despite technology and automation the shortage of workers was acute. Colonial societies al-

ways lacked manpower. And since most human colonies were products of the Exodus there was a mental set against high population densities and expanding birthrates. The consequences were too familiar. Some of the older colonies weren't so badly crippled, but Vishnu was relatively young—less than three centuries old—and men were still alive who remembered the bad old days.

It was easier now that he had Annalee's files, but it was far from a simple job. And Varden was taking an inordinate interest in manpower. And Annalee was taking an inordinate interest in him. Not that he disliked it. But it did complicate things to have a fellow agent for a mistress. She knew the hazards of this business, and tried to protect him. She fussed over him, gave him unnecessary advice, and generally muddled his thinking while trying to protect him. It was a ghastly mixture of pleasure and discomfort that he disliked even as he enjoyed.

"I'm sorry, sir," Ballerd said to Varden for the hundredth time. "There simply aren't enough people available to do what you wish. I realize that the Yarvid Delta Project is necessary, but to make ten

thousand labor units available I'd have to rob the Navy. They simply don't exist in the civil population."

"You can't rob the Navy," Varden said flatly.

Ballerd shrugged. "I know," he said, "But what *can* I do? I can't take men from other departments and there's almost nothing left in the manpower pool. The rehabilitees are a drop in the bucket, the children are too young, and the students are necessary for the future. What's left?"

Varden shrugged his shoulders. "That's your problem," he said.

"No sir, it's yours."

"What?"

"As I've said, we have nothing available, but it can be obtained."

"How? Where?"

"On Krishna, or Thoth, the other two planets in this sector."

"Are you advocating conquest?"

"If necessary. But we could try to hire labor from them first."

"We've tried. No dice."

"We need manpower," Ballerd said. "Both of those worlds have good-sized populations, and both are inferior to us technically and economically."

Varden smiled. "Well, your

thought is not new. But the governments of Krishna and Thoth are singularly selfish. They won't let us have the men." Varden's smile became a grin. "So what do we do?"

"So they want to keep what they can't use—so we take it."

"You forget the Confederation. They're members."

Ballerd sneered. "Show that debating society an established fact and they'll have to like it."

"Not necessarily. They never have—and we're not going to provoke them. I don't think they'll touch us as long as we stay in our own back yard—but if we move out they might."

"Ha!" Ballerd snorted. "Not likely. We're out on the galactic edge. No fleet could bother us at this range. They'd be too far from their bases."

"You should study the Firemen," Varden said.

Ballerd smiled to himself. *He* should study the Firemen! He'd been working as one for more years than Varden had been alive! The Bureau—insiders called it the Fire Department and its agents Firemen—The Bureau of Interworld Relations of the Galactic Confederation was an outgrowth of the old inspection system that kept peace on

earth in the early days of the Atomic Revolution before mankind reached interstellar space. In its thousand years of existence the Bureau had refined its technics to inspect worlds and systems which didn't want to be inspected, to squelch brush-fire wars, to cool off hot spots before they erupted and engulfed a whole sector of civilization in blazing ruin.

In a civilization where technology was still eons ahead of social development, the Fire Department was an absolute necessity. It was the governor, the balance wheel that kept the whole creaky machinery of the Confederation from flying apart from internal pressures.

If the Fire Department could be said to believe in anything, it believed that there was no such thing as a government beneficial to all its citizens. Therefore, it worked toward the interim improvement and ultimate abolition of all government. It wasn't going to attain its aim of enlightened anarchy in the foreseeable future, people being what they were, but the goal was there and someday it might be reached providing the Confederation was kept at peace long enough for a true social science to develop. Its

methods were legion; from persuasion to assassination, from conversion to coercion, from reason to emotion, from honor to treachery. The goal was what mattered. The means, it was long ago decided, were unimportant. Firemen were the most skillful agent provocateurs, the most convincing messiahs, the most tender empathists, and the most brutal sadists in all the galaxy. They were admired, hated, feared, loved and respected. They were everywhere, yet seldom seen and seldom known. They were the conscience, the lash, the personification of authority that even the most absolute ruler or government eyed with fear and respect. They were dedicated to peace and would preserve it if they had to slaughter every war monger in the galaxy.

"I've been expecting them to interfere ever since we took over," Varden continued. "I thought for awhile that Anna-lee was one of their agents but there's no evidence of that. They made no move to interfere, but they're probably here all right. Still, they haven't done anything yet—nor will they unless they get an opportunity. Our business is not to give them one. While

I agree with you in principle, your method is deadly. So we'll never make an overt move against Krishna or Thoth. They'll invite us in!"

"This I want to see," Ballerd said. "How do you plan to do it?"

Varden chuckled. "Simple. Take Krishna for example. We infiltrate using native Krishnans. The situation there is essentially the same as it was here—a ruling group of city-states and a restless peasantry. An essentially agricultural community eager for change, held back by a small but well-armed police and army. With care, we should be able to get weapons and a *limited quantity of ammunition* into the hands of the revolt. Now do you get the picture?"

Ballerd smiled. "Yes, sir. It's obvious. After the peasants revolt, we step in to maintain order."

"On the invitation of the ruling class," Varden added.

"They'll invite us?"

"Of course. Officially, we're friendly. In fact we're the only friends they have. They've been ripe for the Firemen for nearly a generation, and they know it. But they've kept their noses clean. They'll turn to us before they'll ever turn to Earth Central."

"Then we liquidate the rulers?"

"Certainly not."

"The peasants?"

"We remove their leaders. And why not? Most of them will be our own people. After that we'll be in the saddle—and with their ruling class in our hands and properly conditioned, we'll take over in fact if not physically. Then we'll get our labor."

Ballerd nodded. "I get the idea. It's neat."

Varden chuckled. "It is indeed." He shrugged. "But modern conquest has to be neat. We can't afford to attract attention."

"And the Firemen will do nothing?"

"What can they do? They only have two choices. They can either help the Krishnan peasants or their rulers. Either way we'll win. You see, this is modern conquest. It isn't exactly war, yet it is war in its broadest sense. Literally anything can be a useful tool if it furthers our ends. Fighting is no part of the plan nor is direct interference. We simply can't resort to formal war to gain our ends because we'd have the whole Confederation on our necks if we did. So we must work more slowly and employ a continuing pressure that uses every trick of espionage,

sabotage, propaganda, economics, sociology, psychology, and technology to achieve its ends. Until we are bigger than our opposition we can't come into the open."

"I see," Ballerd said slowly. He eyed Varden with respectful admiration. Alone, the man had developed a system that was the duplicate of the Department's thousand year evolution. Dedicated to a diametrically opposite goal the system would still work. Suddenly he realized that the *type* of goal was unimportant, and that the methods were, in the last analysis, the only thing that held any meaning. Varden was a genius. Evil, perhaps, but a genius nevertheless.

"But this isn't the thing you asked me up here for," he continued. "I've worked with you long enough to know that. You didn't summon me here merely to lecture on revolutionary strategy."

Varden laughed. "You're right, as usual. I want you to head up the Navy Department, to take Haring's place."

"Why?"

"Several reasons. You're a good organizer, a team player, and you're intelligent. You know how to improvise—and you have a capacity for inspiring loyalty in your staff. Har-

ing isn't nearly your caliber. He's tough but he's a proceduralist and lacks imagination. Frankly, I think the Admirals are running him. I need someone I can depend upon in case there's a showdown with Earth Central. I need the Fleet for a club. Sure—we couldn't possibly win a war with the Confederation but we could cause so much damage while losing that they'd think twice before attacking us. I can't depend on Haring to carry out my orders if it comes to that sort of a showdown but I think I can depend on you. I'm arranging a mutual transfer. You'll accept, of course."

"Of course."

"I was sure you would. After all, there's more power in the Navy than there is anywhere else except in my office. Now when can you start?"

"Tomorrow?"

Varden laughed. "Take your time," he said. "It'll be a few months before we're ready to move. Take a month. You and Haring can brief each other."

"Haring's not going to like this."

"He doesn't have to," Varden said flatly. "I give the orders."

The mechanics of authoritarian government are simple, Ballerd reflected. The leader

states his wishes to his staff, and they in turn transmit them to their staffs. The whole thing spreads outward like ripples from a stone dropped into a quiet pool. And finally, out on the fringes, the will of the ruler is carried out by men who know him only as a name.

The surprising thing, of course, is that people put up with it. It just went to show that society was no better than it had been in the Dark Ages. People were sheep and all the guidance in the universe wasn't going to make them goats. They *wanted* someone else to do their thinking for them. And if that thinking involved their suffering and dying, it was a small price to pay to avoid the horror and uncertainty of making their own decisions. He realized with a mild revulsion that the only way to stop a setup like this was at the center, by smashing the leader himself. There was no truth in that ancient belief that the system would carry on even if the leader was gone. In an absolute dictatorship the leader *was* the state. Without him it would die—or change so much that it could no longer act. No subordinate had the leader's capacity to rule. Had there been one, he would be

the leader or be ruthlessly eliminated. A leader doesn't—can't—tolerate competition. Ballerd smiled thinly. If there was a weakness in Varden's system, that was it.

But Varden wasn't a fool. He couldn't be destroyed easily and with modern gerontological techniques, there wasn't much chance of his dying a natural death in the near future. Ballerd grimaced. Destroy him. That was easy to say. But there'd be plenty of work before the first shot could be fired. It would have to succeed the first time. There would be no second chance. The only mistake Varden had made was to assume that the firemen were honorable, that they wouldn't move unless given cause.

He took a government cab from the carpool and went home. For the moment he had taken all he could endure. He needed the comfort Annalee could offer. He checked in with the defense mechs, landed, opened the door of the cab and stepped down on the familiar roof of his fortress-like house between a cluster of quick firing missile launches. With a silent rush, the cab leaped skyward under its automatic controls and disappeared back in the direction of Union Headquarters. He

watched it go as the launchers automatically tracked it, eyes squinted at the unrestful glare of Vishnu's cloudless yellow sky—and then slowly walked toward the manlift that would take him down to the living area below, automatically giving the proper responses that allowed him to pass through the defenses and alarms.

Everything was abnormal, he thought bitterly. Even the air of his house was strange. There was a faint sharp antiseptic bite to it that tickled his nostrils and made him want to sneeze. For a moment he didn't recognize the odor—then memory came with a rush—*ozone!* The whole place reeked of it!

He followed his nose. It led him through the house to the short corridor that ended at Annalee's room. The hallway smelled like an electroweld plant. Quietly he opened the door.

She was sitting in front of a haywire arrangement of tubes, coils and condensers that pulsed with an eerie bluish glow as the big bronze megatron tube poured ozone into the room from its coruscating surface.

He grimaced, remembering a humorously accurate remark

that the only way one could trace a nondirectional communicator was to smell it out. But what was *Annalee* doing with a thing like this?

She was talking to someone parsecs away, huddled over the microphone, her hand on the scrambler control that varied the frequency to a prearranged pattern—"and to my knowledge the situation is deteriorating badly. It isn't critical yet—but you'd better make other plans and *soon*. I don't think he's capable of handling it. Just a matter of the wrong man in the right place. I would estimate another month before Varden is ready to move. The preliminary steps should be completed by that time . . . No—he's still running Manpower, and as you know that position is not the critical one we need to fill . . . No, I still am certain we did the right thing. The only trouble is that Varden is as suspicious as a wild animal . . . Personally, I think I should level with Ballerd but if you insist I'll hold off. This is a good O.P. and perhaps you're right . . . Roger. Two Sixty Three out."

"Very interesting," Ballerd said.

With a gasp she turned to face him.

"At the risk of sounding

trite," Ballerd said slowly, "how long has this been going on?"

"From the time you brought me here. I just couldn't see you taking such chances. So I've been trying to get you replaced. I don't want a corpse."

"You utter blithering fool," Ballerd said venomously. "Do you know what you've done?"

She shook her head.

"You've alerted Varden! Sure, I know they can't trace this rig but they can tap it. And even though Security can't crack our scrambler, they know it's us by the mere fact that they can't crack it. And given time they'll unscramble some of the stuff. They've got it all on tape and judging from what you've been saying they'll have enough to put the finger on both of us—and whatever we've done will go down the drain! Varden *knows* that we're here, and it's only a question of time before he finds out. He's not stupid. He's a genius. He's duplicated our setup. Now clean that mess up—dispose of it, and *don't ever* try to broadcast again. Trust a woman to louse things up. Just when I've conned Varden into giving me the Navy!"

"He what?"

"You heard me. I've been offered the Navy—N-A-V-Y—get it?"

"When?"

"This morning."

"When do you take over?"

"No comment."

"Why not?"

"No trust."

"But how can I help if I don't know what's going on?" Annalee wailed.

"You can't but you can't hinder either. Now be a good girl and keep out of my way, or I'll beat you like a drum."

"Men," she snorted. "That's all they can think of. Shoot them. Kill them. Beat them up. All of you think with your biceps rather than your brain!"

"You should talk. But I suppose you're right. Still, I wonder what part of *your* anatomy takes over when your brain quits." He looked at her meaningly and she blushed.

"I can't help what they did when they remodelled me," she said. "I had a normal set of emotions once."

"Well, just sit on them and stop thinking with them."

"You're insufferably nasty," she said.

Ballerd grinned. She was on the defensive now. Women might be Firemen but they'd never stop being subjective. It

was about ready to come now, the barrage of recrimination and justification.

"And after all I did for you—" Annalee began.

Ballerd sighed and stopped listening. It would be over after awhile and then they could start planning. He'd tell her his plans, of course. She had a good head and a quick eye for detail. If only she were not a woman—and if only she were not—he shook his head. He didn't mean that last, not any part of it.

"One thing's certain," Annalee said. "No matter how we work it it's going to be difficult. We'll need everything at hand, a split second timetable, and more luck than we deserve if we expect to get away with it. We can blank the scanners for about three minutes by shorting the line in your office."

"I know. But Varden's the key to everything. We have to take the chance. It's the only way."

"Yes—that's why I sent in his profile a year ago."

"I read it. It was good."

She smiled. "And those tridi photos were honeys," she said. "I even had scale calibrations incorporated in the shots."

"You *what*?"

"Scale calibrations — you know, measurements!"

"Get on that communicator—*right now!*"

"But you said—"

"Forget it. You were smart to build it. Get your contact and have a tissuemold of Varden made as soon as possible. Make it crash priority. I want that duplicate here in a month. No longer. And make it clear to them that it's essential!"

"What are you thinking of?"

"It's just an idea now. We'll kick it around and polish it later." He grinned. "Did I ever tell you that sometimes you are a genius, *besides* being beautiful?" he asked.

"You had some other ideas a short while ago," she replied.

"Forget it. You've made up for everything. You're wonderful."

Annalee smiled as she closed the power switch on the communicator. He wasn't angry now, and later perhaps he'd prove it. She shook her head. Sometimes this new body interfered with rational thought, and it was questionable as to whether it or her mind was in control.

"Ballerd!" Varden's voice crackled over the intercom. "I want to see you at once!"

"Coming, sir," Ballerd said. He rose slowly—well—to use

a much-worn cliché—this was it. Either it worked or the fleet came in and blasted Vishnu out of the sky. The command decision had been reached a week ago. He had two more days until deadline—and a hundred million more or less innocent lives were hanging on his actions. The Confederation was alarmed and it reacted in the only way it knew—with overwhelming naked force. Orders were already issued and if Varden wasn't checked there would be war. Already the fleet units were assembling. It was a chancy business. The Vishnan fleet was good and its smallness was counterbalanced by its closeness to base. If the Confederation went through with this and success wasn't immediate, the Union could hold out indefinitely. The armed force of the Confederation would be chewed up in a grinding war of attrition. Defections would occur, and in the end the whole of Civilization would lose whether the Union was smashed or not. Social evolution would be set back several generations and much of the painfully built work of the Fire Department would be undone.

He walked across the room, pushed the button to summon the elevator that would take

him to Varden's quarters, and waited while the door slid open. The door to his inner office opened and a man came out followed by Annalee. She was acting as his secretary now—and perhaps giving Suzuki's surveillance boys something to grin about with some of her actions. But it was good camouflage. The two men entered the elevator. Nothing happened. "The scanners are off. Come on," Ballerd said. His fingers caressed the tiny needle gun in his pocket as he applied his ID plaque to Varden's private entrance. He shot down the two Security men inside the door before they realized he was armed, and opened the inner door to Varden's chambers.

Varden glared at him furiously. "Did you know this?" he asked accusingly, waving a paper in his hand. Ballerd didn't have to look at it. He'd made it up himself. It was the intelligence summary of Earth Central's recent actions.

"Of course. The fleet's been informed. I've already sent message torps, sir. It's too bad that they're on maneuvers and under communication silence—but they should get the message early tomorrow. But we didn't know. Central clamped on a security blackout and our

agents couldn't get messages out."

"Tomorrow!" Varden exploded. "This message says two days!"

"I know, sir—but that's the first sign we have had the Confederation was considering action against us. You could accede to their demands if you don't feel up to tackling the Grand Fleet.

"Do you think I'll *crawl* to them?" Varden roared.

"I suppose not, sir, but two days is a short time. We're going to be at a disadvantage."

"I know," Varden said. "But if we get the ships here in time—"

"It'll still be messy."

"Well, then—what do you suggest?"

"I'd suggest that you resign. That'd satisfy the Confederation. You could always resume control later."

"It's no good. With this bunch of power-grabbers at the top I'd never make it. Besides the Confederation wants my scalp!" Varden looked unhappy. "What did I do to provoke them to action like this?"

"The Krishnan government protested?"

"No—it's something else. That takeover went strictly according to plan. I'd bet it was the Firemen. This smells

like their work. But why? We were careful not to provoke anyone."

"Probably they thought that if you succeeded with Krishna, you could succeed again," Ballerd said, "and every other would-be emperor in the Confederation would try to follow your footsteps. You're just the horrible example. You can't be allowed to succeed. The Union is no worse than many other tyrannies except for one thing. It's successful! And that success is due to you. You are the Union. Without you its ambitions would be limited and in time it would degenerate into just another oligarchy—too obsessed with its petty internal affairs to become troublesome. But with you at its head, the Union is a four alarm fire that can wreck the Confederation. If you had been content with this world, then we would have been content with you, but your profile is a conqueror's. And of course we can't allow conquest to succeed. It disrupts the peace."

Comprehension and fury chased each other across Varden's face. "We?" he exploded. "Us?—You dirty spy!"

Ballerd shook his head. "Fireman," he corrected.

Varden's hand slapped his desk.

Ballerd watched—motionless. Nothing happened.

Varden reached for his jacket.

"Hold it!" Ballerd's voice was sharp. The gun was in his hand.

Varden looked with blank-faced surprise. "But—you've been searched. His expression turned to one of horror as he looked past Ballerd at the hall.

There was a half sad, half cruel smile on Ballerd's face. "You have a lot to learn but you're getting the idea," he said as he squeezed the trigger.

The expression of surprise was still on Varden's face as he fell.

Ballerd spun around to face the open door. A duplicate Varden was standing there, gun in hand, indecision on his face. "Dammit, man," Ballerd gritted, "you know what to do! Get it over!"

Flame blossomed in the synthetic Varden's hand. A crushing blow hit Ballerd in the chest. And everything went dark . . .

It was like floating upward out of a pit of ink. Slowly there was movement, light, sound—and pain. But the pain wasn't unbearable.

"Thank God," someone said.

"I was afraid that it was too low. He'll live but it was close—damned close!"

Someone was crying. He opened his eyes. Annalee was bending over him and the expression on her face was radiant.

"Well—" he asked, "did it work?"

"Perfectly. You looked convincingly dead, and Varden—our Varden—liquidated Suzuke before he could investigate. Accused him of criminal carelessness in letting the automatics fail, and letting an assassin like you get that close to him. But he's having a hard time keeping things under control. He isn't the leader type. He'll have to be replaced. He was the best we had at the time."

"Did you get Varden out?"

She nodded. "It worked just like you figured. With you supposedly dead and Suzuke liquidated, the Committee went into a king-sized flip. He went out with the bodies and nobody thought a thing about it until it was too late, and what with our boy threatening hellfire and damnation, everyone was too glad to save his skin without worrying too much about an extra body. But they'll start thinking pretty soon unless someone gets out there who can

run things. Our lad can't."

"Who's been picked?"

"Guess— Just why do you think we were so eager for you to survive?"

"Not me. I want no part of it!"

"You have no choice. It's tissuemold for you tomorrow, my lad, then off to Vishnu. We've got a slick transfer scheme all worked out. And, incidentally, you've added a new tactic. The chief's all worked up about it. Don't assassinate, replace, and you're the guinea pig. Better do a good job."

Ballard shrugged. Tissue-mold had restored his smashed shoulder. He was as good as new. "Take care of Varden," he said.

"Don't worry," said Annalee, "he's getting a complete reorientation. When they're through with him, he'll be a better fireman than either of us. That was another idea that clicked. Someday you're going to be sitting behind a big desk here at Earth Central giving orders. You have the executive mentality, and running Vishnu should help develop it."

"God forbid, but if so, I shall need a secretary."

"Do you have anyone in mind?" Annalee asked.

THE END

*All peoples have their myths of wanderers through
time . . . who, though they may not end their own
sufferings, have the power to help others save
themselves . . . Such a one was the gaunt man.*

YOU'RE walking down Fool's Street, Laura used to say when he was drinking, and she had been right. He had known even then that she was right, but knowing had made no difference; he had simply laughed at her fears and gone on walking down it, till finally he stumbled and fell. Then, for a long time, he stayed away, and if he

went, and this one was no different from the others. The same skeletonic signs bled beer names in naked windows, the same winos sat in doorways nursing muscatel; the same drunk tank awaited you when at last your reeling footsteps failed. And if the sky was darker than usual, it was only because of the rain which had begun falling early

a DRINK of DARKNESS

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

Illustrator SCHELLING

had stayed away long enough he would have been all right; but one night he began walking down it again—and met the girl. It was inevitable that on Fool's Street there should be women as well as wine.

He had walked down it many times since in many different towns, and now he was walking down it once again in yet another town. Fool's Street never changed no matter where you

that morning and which had been falling steadily ever since.

Chris went into another bar, laid down his last quarter and ordered wine. At first he did not see the man who came in a moment later and stood beside him. There was a raging rawness in him such as even he had never known before, and the wine he had thus far drunk had merely served to aggravate it. Eagerly he drained the glass which the

bartender filled and set before him. Reluctantly he turned to leave. He saw the man then.

THE man was gaunt—so gaunt that he seemed taller than he actually was. His thin-featured face was pale, and his dark eyes seemed beset by unimaginable pain. His hair was brown and badly in need of cutting. There was a strange statuesqueness about him—an odd sense of immobility. Raindrops iridesced like tiny jewels on his gray trench coat, dripped sporadically from his black hat. "Good evening," he said. "May I offer you a drink?"

For an agonizing moment Chris saw himself through the other's eyes—saw his thin sensitive face with its intricate networks of ruptured capillaries; his gray rain-plastered hair; his ragged rain-soaked overcoat; his cracked rain-sodden shoes—and the image was so vivid that it shocked him into speechlessness. But only briefly; then the rawness intervened. "Sure I'll have a drink," he said, and tapped his glass upon the bar.

"Not here," the gaunt man said. "Come with me."

Chris followed him out into the rain, the rawness rampant now. He staggered, and the gaunt man took his arm. "It's only a little ways," the gaunt man said. "Into this alley here

. . . now down this flight of stairs."

It was a long gray room, damp, and dimly lit. A gray-faced bartender stood statuesquely behind a deserted bar. When they entered he set two glasses on the bar and filled them from a dusty bottle. "How much?" the gaunt man asked.

"Thirty," the bartender answered.

The gaunt man counted out the money. "I shouldn't have asked," he said. "It's always thirty—no matter where I go. Thirty this, or thirty that; thirty days or thirty months or thirty thousand years." He raised his glass and touched it to his lips.

Chris followed suit, the rawness in him screaming. The glass was so cold that it numbed his fingertips, and its contents had a strange Cimmerian cast. But the truth didn't strike him till he tilted the glass and drained the darkness; then the quatrain came down from the attic of his mind where he had stored it years ago, and he knew suddenly who the gaunt man was—

*So when at last the Angel of
the Drink*

*Of Darkness finds you by
the river-brink,*

*And, proffering his Cup, in-
vites your Soul*

*Forth to your Lips to quaff
it—do not shrink.*

But by then the icy waves were washing through him, and soon the darkness was complete.

DEAD! The word was a hoarse and hideous echo caroming down the twisted corridor of his mind. He heard it again and again and again—*dead . . . dead . . . dead*—till finally he realized that the source of it was himself and that his eyes were tightly closed. Opening them, he saw a vast starlit plain and a distant shining mountain. He closed them again, more tightly than before.

"Open your eyes," the gaunt man said. "We've a long ways to go."

Reluctantly Chris obeyed. The gaunt man was standing a few feet away, staring hungrily at the shining mountain. "Where are we?" Chris asked. "In God's name, where are we!"

The gaunt man ignored the question. "Follow me," he said, and set off toward the mountain.

Numbly Chris followed. He sensed coldness all around him but he could not feel it, nor could he see his breath. A shudder racked him. Of course he couldn't see his breath—he had no breath to see. Any more than the gaunt man did.

The plain shimmered, became a playground, then a lake, then a foxhole, finally a summer street. Wonderingly he identi-

fied each place. The playground was the one where he had played as a boy. The lake was the one he had fished in as a young man. The foxhole was the one he had bled and nearly died in. The summer street was the one he had driven down on his way to his first post-war job. He returned to each place; played, fished, swam, bled, drove. In each case it was like living each moment all over again.

Was it possible, in death, to control time and relive the past?

He would try. The past was definitely preferable to the present. But to which moment did he wish to return? Why, to the most precious one of all, of course—to the one in which he had met Laura. *Laura*, he thought, fighting his way back through the hours, the months, the years. "*Laura!*" he cried out in the cold and starlit reaches of the night—

And the plain became a sun-filled street—

HE and Minelli had come off guard duty that noon and had gone into the Falls on a twelve-hour pass. It was a golden October day early in the war, and they had just completed their basic training. Recently each of them had made corporal, and they wore their chevrons in their eyes as well as on their sleeves.

The two girls were sitting at a booth in a crowded bar, sipping ginger ale. Minelli had made the advances, concentrating on the tall dark-haired one. Chris had lingered in the background. He sort of liked the dark-haired girl, but the round-faced blonde who was with her simply wasn't his cup of tea, and he kept wishing Minelli would give up and come back to the bar and finish his beer so they could leave.

Minelli did nothing of the sort. He went right on talking to the tall girl, and presently he managed to edge his stocky body into the seat beside her. There was nothing for it then, and when Minelli beckoned to him Chris went over and joined them. The round-faced girl's name was Patricia and the tall one's name was Laura.

They went for a walk, the four of them. They watched the American Falls for a while and afterward they visited Goat Island. Laura was several inches taller than Minelli, and her thinness made her seem even taller. They made a rather incongruous couple. Minelli didn't seem to mind, but Laura seemed ill at ease and kept glancing over her shoulder at Chris.

Finally she and Pat had insisted that it was time for them to go home—they were staying at a modest boarding-house just off the main drag, taking in the

Falls over the weekend—and Chris had thought, *Good, now at last we'll be rid of them.* Guard duty always wore him out—he had never been able to adapt himself to the two hours on-two hours off routine—and he was tired. But Minelli went right on talking after they reached the boarding-house, and presently the two girls agreed to go out to supper. Minelli and Chris waited on the porch while they went in and freshened up. When they came out Laura stepped quickly over to Chris's side and took his arm.

He was startled for a moment, but he recovered swiftly, and soon he and Laura were walking hand in hand down the street. Minelli and Pat fell in behind them. "It's all right, isn't it?" Laura whispered in his ear. "I'd much rather go with you."

"Sure," he said, "it's fine."

And it was, too. He wasn't tired any more and there was a pleasant warmth washing through him. Glancing sideways at her profile, he saw that her face wasn't quite as thin as he had at first thought, and that her nose was tilted just enough to give her features a piquant cast.

Supper over, the four of them revisited the American Falls. Twilight deepened into darkness and the stars came out. Chris

and Laura found a secluded bench and sat in the darkness, shoulders touching, listening to the steady thunder of the cataract. The air was chill, and permeated with ice-cold particles of spray. He put his arm around her, wondering if she was as cold as he was; apparently she was, for she snuggled up close to him. He turned and kissed her then, softly, gently, on the lips; it wasn't much of a kiss, but he knew somehow that he would never forget it. He kissed her once more when they said good night on the boarding-house porch. She gave him her address. "Yes," he whispered, "I'll write." "And I'll write too," she whispered back in the cool damp darkness of the night. "I'll write you every day . . ."

EVERY day, said the plain. *Every day*, pulsed the stars. *I'll write you every day . . .*

And she had, too, he remembered, plodding grimly in the gaunt man's wake. His letters from her were legion, and so were her letters from him. They had gotten married a week before he went overseas, and she had waited through the unreal years for him to come back, and all the while they had written, written written; *Dearest Chris* and *Dearest Laura*, and words, words, words. Getting off the bus in the little town where she

lived, he had cried when he had seen her standing in the station-doorway, and she had cried too; and the years of want and of waiting had woven themselves into a golden moment—and now the moment was shreds.

Shreds, said the plain. *Shreds*, pulsed the stars. *The golden moment is shreds . . .*

The past is a street lined with hours, he thought, *and I am walking down the street and I can open the door of any hour I choose and go inside. It is a dead man's privilege, or perhaps a dead man's curse—for what good are hours now?*

The next door he opened led into Ernie's place, and he went inside and drank a beer he had ordered fourteen years ago. "How's Laura?" Ernie asked. "Fine," he said. "And Little Chris?" "Oh, he's fine too. He'll be a whole year old next month."

He opened another door and went over to where Laura was standing before the kitchen stove and kissed her on the back of the neck. "Watch out!" she cried in mock distress. "You almost made me spill the gravy."

He opened another door—Ernie's place again. He closed it quickly. He opened another—and found himself in a bar full of squealing people. Streamers drifted down around him, streamers and multicolored balloons. He burst a balloon with his

cigarette and waved his glass. "Happy New Year!" he shouted. "Happy New Year!" Laura was sitting at a corner table, a distressed look on her face. He went over and seized her arm and pulled her to her feet. "It's all right, don't you see?" he said. "It's New Year's Eve. If a man can't let himself go on New Year's Eve, when *can* he let himself go?"

"But darling, you said—"

"I said I'd quit—and I will, too—starting tomorrow." He weaved around in a fantastic little circle that somehow brought him back to her side. "Happy New year, baby—Happy New Year!"

"Happy New Year, darling," she said, and kissed him on the cheek. He saw then that she was crying.

He ran from the room and out into the Cimmerian night. *Happy New Year*, the plain said. *Happy New Year*, pulsed the stars. *Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind . . .* The gaunt man still strode relentlessly ahead, and now the shining mountain occulted half the sky. Desperately Chris threw open another door—

HE was sitting in an office. Across the desk from him sat a gray-haired man in a white coat. "Look at it this way," the gray-haired man was saying.

"You've just recovered from a long bout with a disease to which you are extremely susceptible, and because you are extremely susceptible to it, you must sedulously avoid any and all contact with the virus that causes it. You have a low alcoholic threshold, Chris, and consequently you are even more at the mercy of that 'first drink' than the average periodic drinker. Moreover, your alternate personality—your 'alcoholic alter ego'—is virtually the diametric opposite of your real self, and hence all the more incompatible with reality. It has already behaved in ways your real self would not dream of behaving, and at this point it is capable of behavior-patterns so contrary to your normal behavior-patterns that it could disrupt your whole life. Therefore, I beg you, Chris, not to unleash it. And now, good bye and good luck. I am happy that our institution could be of such great help to you."

He knew the hour that lay behind the next door, and it was an hour which he did not care to relive. But the door opened of its own accord, and despite himself he stepped across the dark threshold of the years . . .

He and Laura were carrying Friday-night groceries from the car into the house. It was summer, and stars glistened gently in the velvet-soft sky. He was

tired, as was to be expected at the end of the week, but he was taut too—unbearably taut from three months of teetotalism. And Friday nights were the worst of all; he had always spent his Friday nights at Ernie's, and while part of his mind remembered how poignantly he had regretted them the next day, the rest of his mind insisted on dwelling on the euphoria they had briefly brought him—even though it knew as well as the other part did that the euphoria had been little more than a profound and gross feeling of animal relaxation.

The bag of potatoes he was carrying burst open, and potatoes bounced and rolled all over the patio. "Damn!" he said, and knelt down and began picking them up. One of them slipped from his fingers and rolled perversely off the patio and down the walk, and he followed it angrily, peevishly determined that it should not get away. It glanced off one of the wheels of Little Chris's tricycle and rolled under the back porch. When he reached in after it his fingers touched a cold curved smoothness, and with a start he remembered the bottle of whiskey he had hidden the previous spring after coming home from a Saturday-night drunk—hidden and forgotten about till now.

Slowly he withdrew it. Star-

light caught it, and it gleamed softly in the darkness. He knelt there, staring at it, the chill dampness of the ground creeping up into his knees. *What harm can one drink do?* his tautness asked. *One drink stolen in the darkness, and then no more?*

No, he answered. Never. *Yes*, the tautness screamed. *Just one. A sip. A swallow. Hurry! If it wasn't meant to be the bag would not have burst.* His fingers wrenched off the cap of their own volition then, and he raised the bottle to his lips . . .

When he returned to the patio Laura was standing in the doorway, her tall slenderness silhouetted softly against the living-room light. He knelt down and resumed picking up the potatoes, and perceiving what had happened, she came out, laughing, and helped him. Afterward she went down the street to her sister's to pick up Little Chris. By the time she got back, the bottle was half empty and the tautness was no more.

HE waited till she took Little Chris upstairs to put him to bed, then he got in the car and drove downtown. He went to Ernie's. "Hi, Chris," Ernie said, surprised. "What'll it be?"

"Shot and a beer," he said. He noticed the girl at the end of the bar then. She was a tall

blonde with eyes like blue mountain lakes. She returned his gaze coolly, calculatingly. The whiskey he had already drunk had made him tall; the boilermaker made him even taller. He walked down to the end of the bar and slipped onto the stool beside her. "Have a drink with me?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. "why not?"

He had one too, soaring now after the earthbound months on ginger ale, all the accumulated drives finding vent as his inhibitions dropped away and his drunken alter ego stepped upon the stage. Tomorrow he would hate what he was tonight, but tonight he loved what he was. Tonight he was a god, *leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills*. He took the blonde to her apartment and stayed the night, and went home in the small hours, reeking of cheap perfume. When he saw Laura's face the next morning he wanted to kill himself, and if it hadn't been for the half-full bottle under the porch, he would have. But the bottle saved him, and he was off again.

It was quite a spree. To finance it, he sold his car, and weeks later, he and the blonde wound up in a cheap rooming-house in Kalamazoo. She stayed around long enough to help him drink up his last dollar, and then took off. He never went

back to Laura. Before, when he had walked down Fool's Street, it had been the booze and the booze alone, and afterward he had been able to face her. But he could not face her now—not Laura of the tender smile, the gentle eyes. Hurting her was one thing; destroying her, quite another.

No, he had not gone back; he had accepted Fool's Street as his destiny, and gone on walking down it through the years, and the years had not been kind. The past was not preferable to the present after all.

THE shining mountain loomed death-tall against the star-flecked sky. He could face it now, whatever it was meant to be; but there was still one more door to open, one final bitter swallow remaining in the cup. Grimly he stepped back across the bottomless abyss of time to the little tavern on School Street and finished the glass of muscatel he had bought six years ago. Then he walked over to the window and stood looking out into the street.

He stood there for some time, watching the kids go by on their way home from school, and after a while the boy with Laura's eyes came into view. His throat constricted then, and the street swam slightly out of focus; but he went on watching, and pres-

ently the boy was abreast of the window, chatting gaily with his companions and swinging his books; now past the window and disappearing from view. For a moment he almost ran outside and shouted, *Chris, remember me?*—and then, by the grace of God, his eyes dropped to his cracked shoes and his mind remembered his seedy suit and the wine-sour smell of his breath, and he shrank back into the shadows of the room.

On the plain again, he shouted, "Why didn't you come sooner, Mr. Death? Why didn't you come six years ago? That was when I really died!"

The gaunt man had halted at the base of the shining mountain and was staring up at the snow-white slopes. His very aspect expressed yearning, and when he turned, the yearning lingered in his eyes. "I am not death," he said.

"Who are you then?" Chris asked. "And where are we going?"

"We are not going anywhere. From this point you must proceed alone. I cannot climb the mountain; it's forbidden me."

"But why must I climb the mountain?"

"You do not have to—but you will. You will climb it because it is death. The plain you have just crossed and upon which you still stand represents the transition

from life to death. You repeatedly returned to moments in your past because the present, except in a symbolic sense, no longer exists for you. If you do not climb it, you will keep returning to those moments."

"What will I find on the mountain?"

"I do not know. But this much I do know: whatever you find there will be more merciful than what you have found—or will ever find—on the plain."

"Who are you?"

The gaunt man looked out over the plain. His shoulders sagged, as though a great weight lay upon them. "There is no word for what I am," he said presently. "Call me a wanderer, if you like—a wanderer condemned to walk the plain forever; a wanderer periodically compelled to return to life and seek out someone on the verge of death and die with him in the nearest halfway house and share his past with him and add his sufferings to my own. A wanderer of many languages and much lore, gleaned through the centuries; a wanderer who, by the very nature of my domain, can move at will through the past . . . You know me very well."

CHRIS gazed upon the thin-featured face. He looked into the pain-racked eyes. "No," he said, "I do not know you."

"You know me very well," the gaunt man repeated. "But through words and pictures only, and a historian cannot accurately describe a man from hearsay, nor can an artist accurately depict a face he has never seen. But who I am should be of no concern to you. What should be of concern to you is whether or not there is a way for you to return to life."

Hope pounded in Chris's brain. "And is there? Is there a way?"

"Yes," the gaunt man said, "there is. But very few men have ever traveled it successfully. The essence of the plain is the past, and therein lies its weakness. Right now you are capable of returning to any moment of your life; but unless you alter your past while doing so, the date of your death will remain unchanged."

"I don't understand," Chris said.

"Each individual, during his life span," the gaunt man went on, "arrives at a critical moment in which he must choose between two major alternatives. Often-times he is not aware of the importance of his choice, but whether he is aware or not, the alternative he chooses will arbitrarily determine the pattern which his future life will follow. Should this alternative precipitate his death, he should be able,

once he is suspended in the past, to return to the moment and, merely by choosing the other alternative, postpone his death. But in order to do so he would have to know which moment to return to—"

"But I do know which moment," Chris said hoarsely. "I—"

The gaunt man raised his hand. "I know you do—and having relived it with you, I do too. And the alternative you chose *did* precipitate your death: you died of acute alcoholism. But there is another consideration. Whenever anyone returns to the past he automatically loses his 'memory' of the future. You have already chosen the same alternative twice. If you return to the moment once more, won't the result be the same? Won't you betray yourself—and your wife and son—all over again?"

"But I can try," Chris said. "And if I fail, I can try again."

"Try then. But don't hope too much. I know the critical moment in my past too, and I have returned to it again and again and again, not to postpone my death—it is far too late for that—but to free myself from the plain, and I have never succeeded in changing it one iota." The gaunt man's voice grew bitter. "But then, my moment and its consequences are firmly cemented in the minds of men. Your case is different. Go then. Try.

Think of the hour, the scene, the way you felt; then open the door. This time I will not accompany you vicariously; I will go as myself. I will have no 'memory' of the future either; but if you interpret my presence in the same symbolic way you interpreted it before, I may be of help to you. I do not want your hell too; my own and those of the others is enough."

The hour, the scene, the way he had felt. Dear God! . . . *It is a summer night and above me stars lie softly on the dark velvet counterpane of the sky. I am driving my car into my driveway and my house is a light-warmed fortress in the night; secure stands my citadel beneath the stars and in the womb of it I will be safe—safe and warm and wanted . . . I have driven my car into my driveway and my wife is sitting beside me in the soft summer darkness . . . and now I am helping her carry groceries into the house. My wife is tall and slender and dark of hair, and she has gentle eyes and a tender smile and much loveliness . . . Soft is the night around us, compassionate are the stars; warm and secure is my house, my citadel, my soul . . .*

THE bag of potatoes he was carrying burst open, and potatoes bounced and rolled all over the patio. "Damn!" he said,

and knelt down and began picking them up. One of them slipped from his fingers and rolled perversely off the patio and down the walk, and he followed it angrily, peevishly determined that it should not get away. It glanced off one of the wheels of little Chris's tricycle and rolled under the back porch. When he reached in after it his fingers touched a cold curved smoothness, and with a start he remembered the bottle of whiskey he had hidden the previous spring after coming home from a Saturday-night drunk—hidden and forgotten about till now.

SLOWLY he withdrew it. Starlight caught it, and it gleamed softly in the darkness. He knelt there, staring at it, the chill dampness of the ground creeping up into his knees. *What harm can one drink do? his tautness asked. One drink stolen in the darkness, and then no more?*

No, he answered. Never. Yes, the tautness screamed. *Just one. A sip. A swallow. Hurry! If it wasn't meant to be the bag would not have burst.* His fingers wrenched off the cap of their own volition then, and he raised the bottle to his lips—

And saw the man.

He was standing several yards away. Statuesque. Immobile. His thin-featured face was pale. His eyes were burning pits of pain.

He said no word, but went on standing there, and presently an icy wind sprang up in the summer night and drove the warmth away before it. The words came tumbling down the attic-stairs of Chris's mind then, and lined up on the threshold of his memory:

*So when at last the Angel of
the Drink*

*Of Darkness finds you by the
river-brink,*

*And, proffering his Cup, in-
vites your Soul*

*Forth to your Lips to quaff
it—do not shrink.*

"No," he cried, "not yet!" and emptied the bottle onto the ground and threw it into the darkness. When he looked again, the man had disappeared.

Shuddering, he stood up. The icy wind was gone, and the summer night was soft and warm around him. He walked down the walk on unsure feet and climbed the patio steps. Laura was standing in the doorway, her tall slenderness silhouetted softly against the living-room light. Laura of the tender smile, the gentle eyes; a glass of loveliness standing on the lonely bar of night—

He drained the glass to the last drop, and the wine of her was sweet. When she saw the potatoes scattered on the patio and came out, laughing, to help him, he touched her arm. "No, not now," he whispered, and

drew her tightly against him and kissed her—not gently, the way he had kissed her at the Falls, but hard, hungrily, the way a husband kisses his wife when he realizes suddenly how much he needs her.

After a while she leaned back and looked up into his eyes. She smiled her warm and tender smile. "I guess the potatoes can wait at that," she said.

THE gaunt man stepped back across the abysmal reaches of the years and resumed his eternal wandering beneath the cold and silent stars. His success heartened him; perhaps, if he tried once more, he could alter his own moment too—

Think of the hour, the scene, the way you felt; then open the door . . . *It is spring and I am walking through narrow twisting streets. Above me stars shine gently in the dark and mysterious pastures of the night. It is spring and a warm wind is blowing in from the fields and bearing with it the scent of growing things. I can smell matzoth baking in earthen ovens . . . Now the temple looms before me and I go inside and wait beside a monolithic table . . . Now the high priest is approaching . . .*

The high priest upended the leather bag he was carrying and spilled its gleaming contents on

the table. "Count them," he said.

He did so, his fingers trembling. Each piece made a clinking sound when he dropped it into the bag. *Clink . . . clink . . . clink*. When the final clink sounded he closed the bag and thrust it beneath his robe.

"Thirty?" the high priest asked.

"Yes. Thirty."

"It is agreed then?" he replied.

For the hundredth, the thousandth, the millionth time, he nodded. "Yes," he said, "it is agreed. Come, I will take you to him, and I will kiss his cheek so that you will know him. He is in a garden just outside the city—a garden named Gethsemane."

THE END




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